AMBERZINE

Issue #2 • August • 1992 • Ten Dollars

Telling role-playing stories is what *Amberzine* is all about, and the one I like best is the one about Carolan and Caine.

It's a long story.

In order to present it to you in any kind of timely fashion we've got to present it in two, out-of-sequence, pieces.

The first, Cathy Klessig's "Morgan's Children," is the start of a serial that will probably continue through the life of *Amberzine* itself. In fact, if it weren't for Cathy Klessig's log of the "Wolfling" campaign, there probably wouldn't even *be* anything called *Amberzine*. Because with Cathy's stuff alone, I can fill the next dozen issues.

Since I've been reading it for years now, I can tell you that it's just going to get better and better.

You won't see Carolan appear in Cathy's logs just yet. In our next issue, when the log picks up sometime in early 1988, he'll join that group. That's when the whole lot of them will be exiled from the Court of Amber.

The *why* of their exile brings us to the second telling of the story, Don Woodward's story of his character Carolan. It's a tale, in his own words, of how Carolan killed his beloved Aunt Llewella. It fills in the events in Carolan's life during the campaign from 1985 to 1988. It'll take the next three issues to get there.

A long story. Worth the wait, because you, our readers, will get to see how a long-term *Amber* campaign can make everything fit together...

Erick Wujcik
August, 1992

Lords and Ladies
of
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announcing the
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to recieve a list
of the art
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and the
opening
minium bids.

MICHAEL KUCHARSKI 455 Orange Wyandotte, MI 48192

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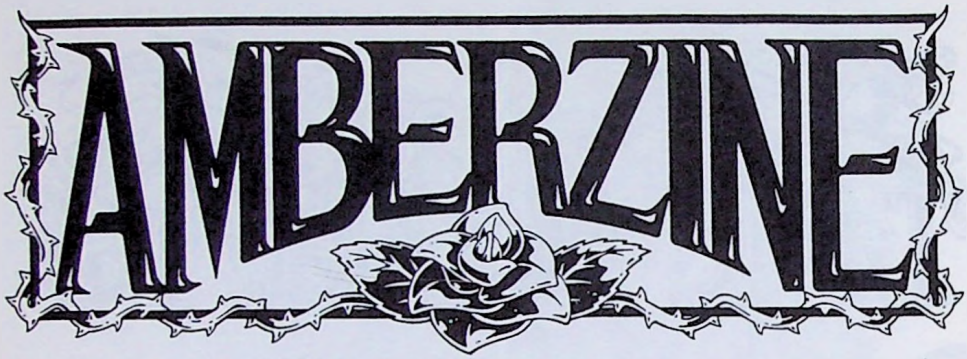

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NEWS & CONVENTION NOTES

My Trip to Paris

A special report by Erick Wujcik

I left on a Monday afternoon, barely squeezing onto my airplane after a perfectly timed number of London subway transfers. I left somewhat tired, as I'd just spent that all day Sunday running a new *Amber* campaign for more than a dozen British role-players at one of England's larger gaming conventions.

At Charles De Gaul Airport, I met Patrice Mermoud for the first time. He and I had been corresponding about *Amber* for years, and it was exciting to finally meet him and his girlfriend Anik.

We then drove straight to the *Salon de Jeux de Reflexion*. The *Salon* was an appendage of a much grander exhibition, devoted to model cars, boats, trains, and airplanes, and the gaming area was all exhibitions, with just a few tables for role-playing and gaming.

When I first arrived I was left more-or-less undisturbed, and introduced to just a few people. However word spread gradually throughout the *Salon*, and by Wednesday, I was being constantly approached by people interested in *Amber*.

The first French company I met with was *Oriflam*, publishers of the French versions of *Stormbringer* and *CyberPunk*. Phillipe Dohr, head of the company, and one of the best role-players I've ever met, and three of his associates (and Patrice, of course) took me out to dinner at a fabulous French restaurant (they offered Mexican, but I demurred).

The questions started right away, and soon as we started to eat they suggested that I run a sample session. I was happy to oblige. Especially since it was obvious that at least two of their number were completely disbelieving at the possibility of a diceless role-playing system, and everyone else was pretty skeptical.

Before the meal was over I started putting them into a game, and asked just how late they would like to play. "Oh, at least until midnight," they replied.

At three A.M., a couple of hours after their deadline, I had to call a halt to the proceedings. They sure didn't want to quit playing.

"Did you miss the dice?" I asked, silencing their protests.

The silence was very gratifying. On their faces was the realization that they hadn't even noticed that we'd been playing without dice! They were just so caught up in the role-playing...

Postscipt: Much as I liked Phillippe Dohr and the guys from Oriflam, the French rights to the *Amber Diceless Role-Playing System* were eventually sold to another company, *Jeux Descartes*.

GAMMACON GAMMA

Iowa City, Iowa

Erick Wujcik will be there playing & speaking on the weekend of January 30th, 1993.

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Although our numbers are low—we print a mere one thousand (1,000) copies of each issue—Amberzine provides our advertisers a means of targeting the most enthusiastic and discriminating of potential customers.

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The frequency of publication is eccentric. *Amberzine* will be published at the discretion of the publisher.

Since the scheduling of *Amberzine* is somewhat unconventional, it is difficult to specify an exact deadline date for inclusion in the next issue. Phage Press respectfully suggests that anyone seeking more specific chronological data should write to the address below.

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Phage Press
Post Office Box 519
Detroit, MI 48231-0519

Dear Mr. Wujcik,

As a fan of the Amber Chronicles (I've read all ten books to date), I eagerly awaited the arrival of your RPG in my city. I confess I was somewhat dismayed by two aesthetic flaws, flaws I petition you to address in future editions of *Amber*: Your spelling of Deirdre is incorrect. You have "ie" instead of "ei," a spelling rule that applies only to nouns and verbs and *not* to personal names. Additionally, the portrait of Deirdre is not consonant with the one painted by the genius Zelazny. A lady friend of my named Deirdre, who remarkably resembles Corwin's favorite, is distressed—and rightly so–whenever her name is misspelt or mispronounced. As a result I could not purchase a copy of the game for her.

Keith L Partain
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Sorry about the misspelling of Deirdre. It's my fault.

Deirdre's Trump depiction was one of most difficult decisions I had to make. All the attempts at conforming with Zelazny's description came off, well... ***boring.*** *Since I see Deirdre as anything but boring, I decided to break with tradition and go with Michael Kucharski's more dynamic version of her Trump. Besides, Roger likes the new version.*

Dear Erick,

First and foremost, my congratulations. I have personally been involved, as a player, in four different attempts at setting a campaign in Amber. Each was fun–each had its own good points and bad points. But this effort...

It's phenomenal. I brought the rulebook to a game meeting (I'm part of the Cornell Strategic Simulations Society), and immediately had people asking me when I was going to run it. When I told them I was there to look for a Game Master, they said, "Put me on the list. I want to *play* this!" We found our Game Master and held an auction with eight players. Two more have joined us since then, and the game has been *very* popular from the outset.

The diceless format is quite familiar to me. It is what several of us eventually gravitated toward when the dice started to bother us by being too random a factor. Find a Game Master you trust, and let them tell you what happens, paying attention to story line and high adventure rather than number crunching. This game makes an excellent compromise stage for the Game Master who wants to try this, but doesn't know how to go about it. Several others will be able to use the framework and drop the rules, as suggested.

There do exist certain vague spots in the rules, and we've had to come up with some compromises, or just made up rules as we went. Two of our major questions dealt with shapeshifting, and I wanted to ask them of you.

Question #1. How much of a mass change can a shapechanger expect to make, assuming they are well-fed, rested, etc.? You mention taking bird form several times through the description on Shape Shifting, but most characters would find birds well below their own mass. Roger Zelazny seems to imply (description of Dara walking the Pattern, toward the end of *Guns of Avalon*) that the mass change can be somewhat large.

Question #2. Does clothing, weaponry, etc. change with the Shape Shifter? Zelazny doesn't say much on the subject. There is no mention of Dara's accoutrements while walking, or when she finished. No pile of clothing by the start of the Pattern was mentioned, but they may have just burned away. Our GM decided that, at least for the moment, clothing changes with the Shape Shifter.

Scott Whitney
Ithaca, New York

Answer #1. You mentioned the "certain vague spots" in the rules, and this is certainly one of those. Quite deliberate, I might add.

Y'see, I believe that the whole relationship of mass change in Shape Shifting can be profoundly affected by how each Game Master arranges the cosmology of their own Amber universe. Personally, I don't

allow much mass changing at all, which is something of a clue as to how my universe works. Other Game Masters have allowed fairly liberal mass changing, which gives my character hints as to how those universes work.

Still, bird shapes need not involve any mass change. The characters simply turn into very large birds (complete with hollow bones). Likewise one can get very small (dense) or very large (hollow), as in Dara's Pattern stroll, without ever actually changing mass...

Answer #2. Well, I'm certainly not going to argue with your Game Master.

After all, in a universe of infinite possibility, it ought to be simple enough to find Shape Shifting clothing...

I've seen different GMs handle this problem in different ways, and, while I hate to weasel (well, actually, I love to weasel...), I don't want to come up with any definitive answer.

Amber Q & A

"Can a Conjurer empower other players characters, or even him/herself?"

Tracy McCormick
San Diego, California

Yes, absolutely. Especially on him/herself (though such an empowerment could easily be dispelled by Power Words, Spells or real Power).

However, it becomes a matter of faith. How many player characters will ***trust*** *another player character enough to open themselves up enough for hours of conjuring?*

If one of my player character trusted another to that degree, then I (as a Game Master) would be howling with glee! After all, many NPCs are capable of masquerading as player characters...

"If some player character buys an Amber or Chaos Devotee, and tries to walk the Pattern/Logrus, yet have not obtained the kind of advancement points required to buy Pattern/Logrus Imprint, what do you do? Tell them no? Let them walk it but with reduced powers? Give them OODLES of Bad Stuff?"

Daniel W. Ferguson
Phoenix, New York

The answer is...

It depends.

All the answers you suggest are quite workable. As Game Master your job is to react to the players. And each player suggests a different solution.

Certainly I'd never tell a ***player*** *much of anything. However, a character might experience any number of obstacles, bad feelings, and heartfelt recommendations. When in doubt, remember that the same character who*

provides the opportunity (i.e., the Devotee), will also likely have a hand in the results.

Fact is, I've yet to have anyone attempt the feat you describe. Though I did have a case where a player character who lacked Pattern and was making plans...

I started a session with a Pattern-less character taking the first step on the Pattern. The player had no idea how the character had arrived there, and started asking all sorts of questions. I answered by asking if the character was concentrating on remembering details, or concentrating on the Pattern underfoot. Over the next few minutes the role-play of the Pattern walk became more detailed, with my describing in loving detail the sparks climbing up, burning shoes and singed hair, until, by the first veil, the character was exhausted, overwhelmed by the Pattern's pressure, and was about to topple.

"What are you doing?" I asked, lowering my voice with tension, "your character can push no more! To stop is to die!"

Then, after the player was completely confounded, "Blinded by flame, your flesh afire, you topple forward... and wake up tangled in the sheets of your own bed."

Funny thing, that player hasn't attempted Pattern since.

"I have been using characters who have obtained Pattern swords, such as Grayswandir. Would you allow characters to obtain such items?"

Billy Burke, Jr.
Killeen, Texax

Sure! Sounds fine to me.

If the players spent the points for their swords, it's not a problem, since the points thrown into weapons will balance out in other areas.

However, I assume that your players have come into possession of the swords without paying any points...

Heh Heh! That means they're walking around with items that are basically bundles of Bad Stuff. Since each sword should be worth about sixteen (16) points, that gives you an excuse to do some very interesting things. What a great opportunity for the Game Master!

For example, have you considered who might be the previous owners of the swords? Isn't it about time for those ancient warriors to reclaim their property? Or perhaps they just serve as the means for some elder relatives to keep track of their whereabouts and actions?

Or, taking an idea from a campaign run by my GM, Don Woodward. What if the swords are based on a different Pattern (in Don's campaign the swords, when all placed in a circle, form a Pattern, but not the Pattern of Amber)? Wouldn't it be neat if the swords were each some kind

of "gateway," used by Pattern dwellers from another universe to gain admission to Amber?

I just wish my players would be so accommodating. Unfortunately they're a little too paranoid to carry around Pattern swords that just happen to be lying around. Early on in my campaign Grayswandir was used to kill Llewella (talk about Bad Stuff!). And the last time they had a pair of interesting swords they made a special trip to the Abyss just to get rid of 'em....

"How detailed can a person get on a personal Shadow for one (1) Point? Also, can you elaborate on Control of Contents?"

Andrew Kar
Clarkston, Michigan

There is no limit on detailing one's Personal Shadow. The player should be encouraged to put as much into their Shadow as they can.

There are a couple of limitations to Control of Shadow Contents. First, there's the time element. Just as it takes time to shift the Shadows you walk, it will take a long time for a character to pace about the Shadow, and the more drastic the change, the longer the change will take.

Second, things from outside the Shadow, or things being controlled by someone else, are technically not part of the Shadow, so the character's Control would not influence them.

Finally, Shadows are very personal things. As Game Master I always take the trouble to interact with the player about their personal relations within their Shadow. Do they have friends there? Patrons? Relatives? Why do they like this place? Players whose characters have emotional ties to their Shadow will be loath to do shifts that might disrupt or subtract their own people... Player Characters who treat Shadows as "things" may very well end up changing the Shadow into a reflection of their own unconscious dreams (or worst nightmares).

"An observation here: It seems that Conjuration should be worth more than 20 points. If you find an item in Shadow and then enhance it with the best of all Abilities and Powers (minus Trump and Sorcery) it only takes twenty-two and a half hours to make. Then to make everything permanent, it only takes about nine days more (full days, without sleep). If a character makes a bunch of these monsters, it won't matter if they lose a few, so what's the point of spending fifteen or fifty points on a permanent Item, when for twenty you can have a multitude of anything? One of my players has done this as he spent so much during Bidding, he couldn't afford Pattern (so he

needed an Item with Shadow Seek). Just thought I'd point that out."

Jeff Stevenson
Kansas City, Missouri

Jeff, I know you appreciate Amber, and I think you appreciate it because it's a role-playing system without limits.

So why are you trying to impose new limits?

Yes, Conjuration can do all that you describe. So what? Anyone with true power can neutralize mere "Items" easily enough.

Of course it makes little sense to spend fifteen or fifty points on permanent Items, ***unless you really want them to be permanent!***

Look at the downside of Conjuration. First, Conjurers can never be sure that their creations are really their own, and haven't been subverted by some other power.

Second, examine anything that a player character might Conjure. Wouldn't some eons-old Amberite have come up with such a thing long before? And thought of ways of counteracting it's threat?

Finally, look at the problem from a role-playing point of view. What kind of personality would want to spend days and days creating trinkets and pets out of Shadow? Surely not egotistical rulers of the universe...

You can do some nifty things with Conjuration, but it is not true Power. When the chips are down, when the Chaos thingies are at the gates, and when Brand comes a'knocking at your door, how much is Conjuration worth then?

If anything, I think that Conjuration is over-priced. But it does make a nice fail-safe for those folks who bid too high to afford real Powers...

"How can I, as a Game Master, make *Amber* easier to play for people who are unfamiliar with the novels?"

T. Nannette Amsden
Morehead, Kentucky

One great way is to have them play characters who are new to Amber. I enjoy introducing new players by having them discover the whole wonderful world of Amber through the actual role-playing.

For example, one of my best role-playing experiences was with a woman who knew nothing of Amber. I started by role-playing a few episodes from her teenage years, discovering that she was very different from other people, as her latent powers started to emerge. When her "Uncle" Bleys finally came to take her to Amber she was able to find things out entirely through role-playing actions and conversations with both player and non-player characters. For example, her Trump Artistry has always been fun because she is constantly experimenting with it as something her

character is just discovering.

If you let players dream, fantasize, and just imagine an ideal sort of fantasy character, you can take that to "build" their background out in Shadow. Then their own ignorance will parallel their character's.

"Why do the players know what the initial character was, but not thereafter? Either they'd always know, or never, surely? It seems logical that if he knew what his character originally had, he'd know what he came to have. As long as the *other* players didn't know the character Attributes, then surely it doesn't matter if the player knows?"

Neil A Fraser
St Peter's, Australia

It matters an awful lot.

One of the main objectives of Amber is that it frees the players from thinking about "game" stuff, so they can concentrate on playing their character.

Initially, the mechanics of Amber are necessary, so that the players can define the kind of character they want to play. However, once the role-playing begins, the mechanics should fall away, becomming less and less important as the player gets more and more in tune with the character.

Let me spell it out with an example. Assume that your character (in just about any role-playing event, not just in Amber) came across an attractive item. An item that just happened to be powerful artifact. So powerful that major forces of the universe were desperate to lay their hands upon it. Then, as things do in role-playing, things start happening. Would your character ***know*** *that his or her life was being messed up because of some trinket?*

I hope you'll say "no, of course not."

It's sort of the same thing in Amber. Each player is making their own karma in the universe. As they get power, they give up a little of themselves in other ways. Unpredictable ways.

At one point Carolan (Don Woodward's character) managed to do a fairly terrible thing. He killed his favorite-and-beloved Aunt Llewella. It was a mistake, but he used Corwin's sword Greyswandir to pull it off.

Corwin was so upset, he refused to take Greyswandir back when it was offered. So Carolan ends up with the problem of whether or not to keep Greyswandir. So long as it was "on loan" from Corwin, it wasn't a threat. Keeping it afterwards was different because, in all likelihood, Greyswandir has some "strings" attached. And Don finally decided it wasn't worth the risk, though, as a player, he never knew what ***points*** *were involved in the decision.*

"What if a character having family in the Courts walks the Logrus after the beginning of the campaign? How many Bad Stuff points does he get? 45? Can a character use magic instead to Shape Shift while on the Logrus? Or can he use the limited Shape Shifting conferred by an Item?"

Fabien Cerutti
Vernon, France

I've never actually had it happen, but here's what I'd do.

First, I want to ask myself a few questions. Does this character have any authentic background for the Courts of Chaos, like a Chaos Devotee or Shape Shifting? Why does the character want to do this? For selfish reasons? Or for some noble cause? How does the character fit into the politics of Amber? And the Courts of Chaos?

Now let's examine the obstacles. No artifact or magic could protectively Shape Shift a character through the Logrus, simply because the artifact and/or magic would also be continuously altered by the Logrus. The character would have to either have Shape Shifting, or would need some active help from outside.

Even more daunting is the likelihood of interference by the Lords of Chaos. After all, with their intimate connection with the Logrus, it's unlikely that they'd fail to notice something as blatant as a Pattern-dweller taking the Logrus. They could choose to kill the character, transport them elsewhere, or help them in completing the ordeal.

Finally, let's look at the possible results. The fun part!

Since the player hasn't paid the points, we Game Masters get to have our fun. The Logrus could be more like an infection than a power, more like a curse than a blessing. What if the character's Logrus were uncontrolled? Or under the influence of Lords of Chaos. After all, the character knows nothing using the Logrus...

Just a few weeks ago one of the local Amber GMs, John Shippers ran a wonderful game where the Norse God Loki "discovered" the Pattern. After convincing a player character to assist him, Loki attempted to walk the Pattern, using some primal artifact that could heal all the damage he suffered in following his Amberite friend.

Could it have worked? Should it have worked?

It's a moot point. The other player characters interfered. The point is that the players believed that it was possible...

"It seems that Logrus is far weaker than Pattern. For example, any time Logrus or any of its tendrils come into contact with something containing Pattern it sends a shockwave through the entire Logrus construct. I'm asking because some of my players think Logrus is a waste of points."

Andre Ringgold
Wilmington, Delaware

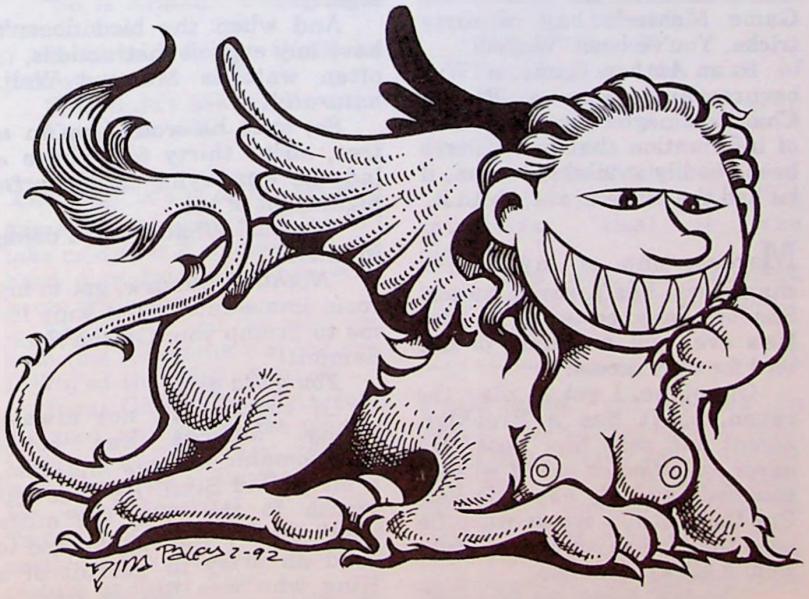
"One of the major problems I have with the *Amber* system is that, in my opinion, you seem to have made the powers of Pattern and Logrus too powerful."

Mike Levay
Roscommon, Michigan

"Why is Pattern 'the bargain of the *Amber* role-playing system?' It seems to convey no other abilities other than the ability to walk through Shadow. Are Logrus users much poorer at the manipulation of Shadow? How should I deal with this in game terms? Can Logrus users find a Shadow of Desire? How should I convince my players that they really want to get Pattern Imprint?"

Lou Wainwright
Troy, New York

If Logrus is better than Pattern why were Merlin and Dara so eager to walk the Pattern?



YOU DIDN'T ASK!

by Carol Dodd

Bop yourself in the head with your Pattern sword, and kick yourself around the gaming table twice at locomotive speed! You've fallen for the worst in the Game Master's bag of dirty tricks. You've been 'Wuj'ed!

In an *Amber* Game, a 'Wuj' occurs any time a Player Character neglects to learn a bit of information that would have been readily available to him, if he had the sense to *ask* about it.

Marcus, one of my player characters, has a raven named Shadow, designed to spy for him. He's even got a Trump of the bird for easy access.

Of course, I get to play the raven, so it has a Brooklyn accent and calls him 'boss.' He never *specified* or *asked* what it sounded like, only how it looked. But the best fun occurs when he uses the bird as an escape route from a sticky situation.

"Shadow, bring me through!" Simple, right?

I have no problem with this. But if he doesn't *ask* where the raven is when he Trumps to it, he can wind up in...

On somebody's window sill.

A window sill, while very reasonable for ravens, is a rather precarious perch for a full-grown adult male of Amberite proportions. This has resulted in Marcus' having to tap on the window (locked, of course) and beg admittance from the person he's spying on. *Not* very discreet!

"Marcus! What are you *doing* out there?"

"Never mind! Let me in!"

Doesn't do much for the dignity!

And when the bird doesn't have any explicit instructions, it often watches Marcus! Well, *naturally*!

So, once he wound up in a tree, about thirty feet above a lady he was trying to avoid, in plain sight of her.

"Marcus! What are you doing up there?"

"*Nothing*! Shadow, get to my room immediately and wait for me to Trump you. On the *floor*, dammit!"

You gotta ask!

Of course, it's not always funny. Marcus has some megalomanic dreams and also, a bit of Bad Stuff. He once fell victim to the 'Wuj' in quite another way, when he decided to send an army in pursuit of a King who was fleeing from a Shadow he had conquered. The

King fled across the border, into a country that was the viceroyalty of another Player Character.

"I didn't know that Al-Sherood was right next to Armaq!" he gasps, as the Viceroy grants the ousted king political asylum and starts manning the border for war.

I sigh, and shake my head, sadly.

"Let me see your map...."

I never make maps, but Marcus' player is a 'detail man.'

"There." I point to a non-descript spot to the right of Al-Sherood.

"But that's a desert." he sputters.

"So is Armaq." I observe in bored tones.

"I didn't *know* that!" he protests.

"You didn't ask....."

You *gotta* ask.....

The 'Wuj' is one of my favorite game techniques, but I can't take credit for it. I learned it the hard way from the man who wrote the game.

The time I had the most fun with this technique was the day I 'Wuj'ed the 'Wuj', himself.

I was GMing by phone, long distance, and Erick was playing Gregor, a Character who is 'something of a Trump artist.' He was drawing a 'bogus Trump' and decided to put a castle in the background of the picture as 'local color.'

The model for the castle was from a Trump he'd seen hanging on the wall of Dworkin's cave.

Dworkin's Trump was actually of Osric's Castle.

Osric's Castle in a barred Shadow that all the Player Characters had been trying to get into, to rescue Random who was a prisoner there. Dworkin would gladly have told him whose Castle it was. *If he'd asked.*

He used the portion he wanted in his own Trump and went his way. When Gregor and the other Player Characters finally broke in past the Shadow barrier and saw Osric's stronghold, I described it again in detail.

"In fact," I told Erick, "you've seen the place before."

"I *have*? Where?"

"Hanging on the wall of Dworkin's cave. In fact, you *used* the castle as a model for a Trump.

(A moment of silence)

"I didn't know...." he murmurs, "that it was *Osric's....*"

(I let it hang, just a moment, so *he* knows I've done it to him.)

"You didn't ask.....

Carol Dodd got hooked on *Amber* role-playing back in 1986, when she created her character *Bronwyn*. She'll be back next issue with another column, on Game Master inspiration, and, if we can fit it in, a piece on her techniques of role-playing with very small groups.

Poems of Fire

The Art of Mastering Pattern

by Chuck Knakal

Somebody said to me, "Since you have Advanced Pattern, you must have a high Psyche."

At first glance this *seems* reasonable.

We usually associate Psyche with manipulating Pattern.

However, it seems to me that Psyche is the **power** you use imposing your will upon pattern. Not the **skill**. After all, who says Pattern must be based on brute force? Couldn't a character with a lower psyche "finesse" the use of pattern? If the object is to open a door, one can pick the lock or kick the door in. Both methods get the job done. Which style do you prefer?

If you want to learn how to best **use** your Advanced Pattern Imprint, then read on. In fact, even if you're one of those players challenged by a lesser power, you could learn something here.

First question. What is Pattern?

Neophytes see Pattern as a twisted path on a large floor.

As someone thinking about Pattern, I expect more from you. For example, Random, in Zelazny's *The Courts of Chaos*, describes what he finds inside the Jewel of Judgement as, "Something like the Pattern, only it seems to be three dimensional."

That would suggest that a Pattern might be a flat plane or a slice through a larger three dimensional shape.

If so, if each slice is a different Pattern, could each different slice result in a different Pattern? Or alternate Pattern realities?

If the other Patterns are shaped differently, and things are different there, could there be a relationship in the length, angle and form of each leg of the Pattern that defines our reality? Are characteristics of planes (or flat plates) relevant? If a Pattern is studied carefully could it be adjusted in some way? Could you at least recognize when someone else has *adjusted* a Pattern?

Are you even going to be able to effectively manipulate those Patterns? What will you do when you get to a place where Pattern isn't "normal?" Will you be able to walk it?

Are Patterns static creations or dynamic? Do they change slightly over time or are they fixed? Are multiple Patterns like plate tectonics, where pressures and stresses can build up over time and must be relieved? Does the concept of a Pattern quake move you? Can you make something like that happen?

How about the three dimensional Pattern? Wouldn't any question about a flat Pattern apply to a three dimensional Pattern?

Does that seem like a lot of questions?

Here are even more questions to shake up your ideas about Pattern and to get your brain moving:

If a Pattern plane could be vibrated, would the energy shift and pool at nodes, or would it be at the anti-nodes?

What is the nature of the lines of the Pattern? I can walk along them, but can I go between them? If I can go between the lines, then can I create "pocket universes" in these places? Would they be similar to Shadow pockets?

If I find an alternate Pattern, where is it in relationship to Amber?

Why does Pattern twist and turn in precisely the manner that it does? What does that mean?

If Pattern energy is seen creeping up your leg as you walk the Pattern, where does it come from? Where does it go? Can you manipulate it? Store it?

A lot of this may come across as a method to improve your role playing.

Well, it is.

I started in the first Amber game. The book didn't exist. I didn't know what Advanced Pattern could do. Early on I decided to examine the Pattern itself, and Pattern wherever I found it. Frequently! I never missed an opportunity to examine the Pattern from a new vantage point.

It was revealed to me that other Patterns existed. I found out about the three dimensional aspect of Pattern. I argued and discussed the theory of Pattern, in character, and eventually worked out a understanding of Pattern, a theory of Pattern, and even a new vocabulary to describe Pattern.

All through role playing.

But I don't want to turn you into a thespian.

I want you to think about Pattern. I want to stimulate your thought processes as to how to best **use** your abilities to **use** Pattern for your benefit.

Your job, as a player, is to develop a method of testing the universe and learning what you can from it.

The *scientific method* works for me. My character formulates theories about Pattern, then devises tests of that theory. Sometimes I am right and sometimes not, but I always learn a little more about Pattern. A little more about what is and isn't possible. What the universe looks like.

Don't expect that your Game Master will be able to answer all these questions at once.

You need to give the Game Master a chance to think about your questions and to develop answers. Stick to asking your Game Master what your character can see, perceive or do.

Do it right and, as you experiment, you'll be giving your Game Master a chance to fit Pattern into the campaign. Eventually the Game Master should develop a feel for how your character sees and uses Pattern.

All Roads *Do* Lead to Amber

by Jane M. Lindskold

Driving Flora's Mercedes through suburban Westchester, an amnesiac Corwin puzzles over Random's axiomatic comment: "All roads lead to Amber" (*Chronicles* 1: 39). Even without a fully functional memory, Corwin recognizes the centrality of this concept. Indeed, he realizes that remembering Amber is the key to regaining his memory. Eventually Corwin remembers that Amber is the prototype for all reality, the center which casts an infinite number of Shadow realities. The Earth on which Corwin has been dwelling for several centuries is just one of many Shadows. Ptolemy, we learn, was correct–only Amber, not Earth, is the center of the universe.

Amber's centrality is more than geographical, for Amber is the source of everything. The histories and myths of the Shadow dwellers may be nothing more than echoes of the struggles of the nearly omnipotent royalty of Amber, altered and distorted by distance and the vagaries of probability.

Amber is a sweeping concept which unsupported could rapidly become nothing more than an excuse for an overly elaborate fantasy universe. Zelazny, however, provides the support for his concept by weaving into the characters, themes, and events of the Amber novels hints of epic and myth that substantiate Amber's claim to being the center of all reality. For practical reasons, it is best to focus on the first five Amber novels, which Corwin narrates, since the second pentalogy remains an open system at this writing.

Zelazny uses his characters as an open forum through which to introduce various elements drawn from a wide range of myth and epic. Corwin, the protagonist of the first five books, does not have any specific source in myth or legend. Zelazny says that the character of Corwin "just occurred" to him. However, in fleshing out Corwin's family, Zelazny chooses to incorporate elements from outside of his personal imagination. Flora, or Florimel, the first sibling whom Corwin encounters after coming to consciousness in Greenwood Sanitarium, is indebted to (or the source of–depending on your perspective) Florimel from Edmund Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. In the *Faerie Queene*, Florimel, whose name means "flower honey," is the ideal of womanhood. She is timid, but essentially good and kind, much like Flora, who assists Eric as much out of fear as out of any

other motivation, and is the least politically adept of all her siblings.

Random, the next sibling Corwin encounters, does not have a specific legendary root. Instead, he is indebted to the tradition of the morality plays, where characters like Knowledge or Fear are active players in the human world. Corwin, who loves him, calls Random: "resourceful, shrewd, strangely sentimental over the damndest things; and on the other hand, his word wasn't worth the spit behind it, and he'd probably sell my corpse to the medical school of his choice if he could get much for it" (1: 27). Zelazny creates a delicious irony when in *The Courts of Chaos* Random, the most chaotic of the Amberites, is anointed king over the source of order.

Julian, whom Corwin and Random first meet in the Forest of Arden, is also not indebted to a single mythic figure, although his name recalls a long series of Roman emperors. Julian's mythic elements are closely connected to the forest he guards and the creatures he uses for the task. The Forest of Arden is best known from Shakespeare's play "As You Like It," and like Shakespeare's wood the Arden of Amber is a beautiful place where one can escape from the intrigues of the court. It can also be a dangerous place, hiding manticore and weir (shape-shifters) among its fantastic perils. Arden is Julian's territory, from which he can challenge even his own brothers and their armies. Although Julian has human troops, the most fearsome guardians are his pack of storm or hell hounds.

Julian supervises this pack from his steed, Morgenstern. Morgenstern is a magical creature created by Julian "out of Shadows, fusing into the beast the strength and speed of a hurricane and a pile driver" (1: 48). Morgenstern, like many of the creatures of Amber, can only be killed by silver weapons. The name Morgenstern, when translated from German to English, means "Morning Star," a very suitable name for this living weapon. A morning-star is a medieval weapon consisting of a spiked sphere on a heavy chain, anchored to a sturdy rod. As Corwin soon recalls, Morgenstern is as deadly a weapon as its more mundane namesake. The name Morgenstern has other implications as well, for "Morning Star" is one of Lucifer's many names. Julian, therefore, is mounted on a hellish steed–an ideal compliment to his pack. In fact, so mounted and accompanied, Julian resembles Herne the Hunter, whose Wild Hunt was the subject of diverse myths and legends throughout Europe and England.

Caine, Julian's friend and ally, as well as one of the masters of Amber's navy, is aptly named. Like his Biblical namesake, he has successfully

committed fratricide. Not only does Caine succeed where the others fail, he has the peculiar honor of first arranging his own murder. Although by killing Brand, Caine removes the greatest danger to Amber's security, Caine is also directly responsible for Deidre's death when the dying Brand drags his hostage with him into the Abyss. Adding to this his attempt on Corwin's life, it is little wonder why Caine's shadows in myth and legend are equally unpleasant people.

Deidre is another character whom Zelazny relates to an epic cycle. When Corwin first sees her picture on the Trump: "My eyes filled with tears" (1: 24). Corwin's sorrow is founded in his forbidden love for his sister, but Deidre of the Sorrows also belongs to Celtic legend. The story of Deidre, whose beauty, like that of Helen of Troy, causes the death of her lover and the destruction of noble houses, seems to have little in common with Amber's princess, but through the tale Zelazny provides a substantial shadow for the "real" woman.

Benedict, the warlord of the princes, also owes a great deal to Celtic mythology. The name Benedict is Latinate, and although there are echoes of Shakespeare's perennial bachelor from "Much Ado About Nothing," Benedict's most obvious "shadow" is Nuada, the warlord king of the Tuatha de Dannan. Nuada, also called Nuada of the Silver Arm, lost his arm in the first battle of Moytura. In order to resume the kingship, from which he was ousted because of a law that the king must be unmaimed, Nuada was fitted with a magical arm of gleaming silver. As with Benedict's mystical prostheses, the arm functioned perfectly, enabling Nuada to once again bring his full expertise to his people's defense. Besides being master warriors, Benedict and Nuada share a nobility of spirit and a sense of restraint uncommon in most of their mythical brethren.

The three red-heads, Bleys, Brand, and Fiona do not share a single mythic root, although the princes' names reflect their fiery temperaments. Bleys, pronounced "blaze," and Brand, as in "fire-brand" are both as elemental as fire. Like fire they can be great benefactors, or great destroyers. When meditating over Bleys' Trump, Corwin recalls the blending of traits in his brother's character: "he held a sword in his right hand and a glass of wine in his left, and the devil himself danced behind his eyes... his chin was slight, but the beard covered it" (1: 24). Brand evokes a similar, but even more ambivalent reaction: "There was a quality of both strength and weakness, questing and abandonment about him. I both approved and disapproved, liked and was repelled by, this one" (1: 24). It is hardly surprising that

these two brothers, with their equally complex sister, should form the triumvirate to take the throne. Bleys actively assaults Kolvir with his army and, after his apparent death, immediately begins to rebuild his forces. Brand is more subtle, and more dangerous; his goal is not only to seize Amber, but to destroy the Pattern and remake reality in his own image.

Suitably, the head of this fractious clan should bear names as overtly layered with legend and myth as any of his children. Oberon shares the name of the legendary king of the fairies, best known from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ganelon, Oberon's alter-ego and whose alias he uses in the middle books, is named for a character from Carolingian romance. The "shadow" Ganelon in *The Song of Roland* causes the death of Roland and the loss of the battle of Roncesvalles. In later years, the name itself became synonymous with treason. Therefore, Ganelon, who Corwin knows as the friend who betrayed him in Avalon, and who, as a guise for Oberon, is the means for the grandest series of deceptions in the first five *Chronicles*, is quite aptly named. As with the names of the princes and princesses, the elaborate history behind the king's names does not detract from the story, but instead provides depth and texture for the entire concept underlying the novels.

Names are far from the only means that Zelazny employs to give Amber substance. Various places and themes that are mentioned throughout the novels add to Amber and are, in fact, more readily apparent than the more subtle blending of character and legend. Corwin makes clear that his experience lies at the heart of all the myths of Avalon: "I was walking in Shadow, seeking a place, a very special place. It had been destroyed once, but I had the power to recreate it, for Amber casts an infinity of shadows... We select a possibility and we walk until we reach it. So, in a sense, we create it... I had sailed, had begun this walk toward Avalon" (1: 163). Familiar epic figures such as Lancelot and Uther belong to Corwin's Avalon, and to the shadows of this Shadow, presumably down to the

> Tir-na Nog'th, the silvery city in the sky above Kolvir, takes its name from the place of the Celtic afterlife, sometimes called the "Land of Youth," other times "The Land of the Living."

Arthurian legend of our own Earth. More immediate, for the reader, is Corwin's assumption that our reality is only an offshoot of his vivid imagination and inherited power. Amber casts many shadows, among which our Earth is hardly the most fantastic or exciting.

Perhaps two of the most finely developed Shadows are Rebma and Tir-na Nog'th, both of which are richly endowed with material drawn from legend and myth. Tir-na Nog'th, the silvery city in the sky above Kolvir, takes its name from the place of the Celtic afterlife, sometimes called the "Land of Youth," other times "The Land of the Living." In insubstantial Tir-na Nog'th, dreams and other portents are often enacted for the visitor.

Rebma's name is simply Amber in reverse, a suitable name for a place which exists only as a reflection of Amber. Rebma is ruled by Moire, whose name is indebted to the Moirae, the three birth goddesses of Greek mythology, often associated with the Fates. Once again, Zelazny uses myth to add dimension to a character's personality. Moire is well aware how integrally her kingdom's fate is intertwined with that of Amber. As she warns Deidre: "I will not give you troops to assault Amber... As you know, the chaos would be reflected within my own realm" (1: 69). Moire's realm beneath the sea is a fantasy echoing numerous myth cycles. When Moire mentions Benedict, "gone these twelve years and ten, however, and Lir knows where his bones may lie" (1: 72), the "Lir" she swears by is a Celtic sea god. Her Tritons, whose size Corwin comments on, belong to Greek myth. Physically Moire and Llewella, Oberon's half-Rebman daughter, owe a great deal to the legends of various sea-dwelling people, although they lack the fishy tails of true mermaids. Thus, although Rebma is very like Amber–even to having a copy of the Pattern–it also vividly demonstrates how unlike "like" can be.

Outside of Amber, the shadows grow less like the original reality and more recognizably indebted to myth and legend. In a Shadow named Lorraine, Corwin contests the encroachment of an evil force which has taken the form of various elements from supernatural and occult lore. The Creatures of the Circle begin their invasion through a faerie circle with a dead child at its center. As the circle spreads, the people within its limits become soulless automatons, akin to the Cauldron Warriors of Welsh Myth. Lorraine, Corwin's mistress in this place, is touched by the enchantments of her namesake land. Her gift for second sight allows her to see something of the future and work to alter the present. However, she finds this gift more curse than blessing.

In the land of Lorraine, magic and myth are ritualized. The forces of the Circle sacrifice to evil masters on ominous altars. Their leader, the Horned One, bears a marked likeness to certain portraits of the Devil with his "man-like shape, but with goat horns and red eyes" (1: 183).

Strygalldwir, the creature he sends to confront Corwin, is obligated to follow the parameters of a Cabbalistic-like magic. Bound as he is by ritual, Strygalldwir cannot cross the threshold without fulfilling certain requirements: "Four times must I ask you and four times be refused before I may enter and slay you" (1: 193). When Corwin asks the demon's name, he gives it with the warning: "Conjure with it and I will eat your heart and liver" (1: 193). Corwin promptly ignores the warning replying "Misli, gammi gra'dil, Strygalldwir" (1: 193), a curse in Thari, language of Amber, which means: "Be off, and bad luck to you" (Shepard 1212). Zelazny derived Thari from an actual language called Shelta Thari. Shelta Thari is purported to be the secret language of the tinkers, one of the most closely knit of the medieval guilds. The mystery of Shelta Thari's origins persists to the present day, making it the perfect ur-language of Amber. The forms of ritual magic belong to yet another established system and connect Corwin's meetings with the creatures of the Circle to the greater reality that is Amber.

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Although none of the first five novels is free of myth and legend, the book that is most inundated with this material is *The Courts of Chaos*. In this novel, the Amberites have abandoned more normal, political intrigues in favor of preserving Amber, and thus all of reality, from Brand and his allies in the Courts of Chaos. Much of the latter half of

the *Courts of Chaos* is taken up by Corwin's epic Hellride carrying the magical Jewel of Judgement across a disintegrating universe. In the course of this journey, Corwin encounters fragments from widely disparate legends and learns something of his place among them.

Resting from the encroaching storm, Corwin speaks to a fellow traveller who tells him the legend of Archangel Corwin: "The Archangel Corwin shall pass before the storm, lightning upon his breast... When asked where he travels, he shall say, 'To the ends of the Earth,' where he goes not knowing what enemy will aid him against another enemy, nor whom the Horn will touch" (2: 351). After being tantalized by this legend, which seems to predict that all his struggles were preordained, Corwin continues his journey next meeting Celtic "Little People," who attempt to stay him from his mission with magical food and drink. Later he encounters the beautiful "Lady," with "long dark hair and wild, dark eyes" (2: 363) who hails him as a "Knight at arms" and offers him food and drink. Corwin recognizes her, and so departs from Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, although first he closes "her eyes with kisses four, so as not to break the charm" (2: 365-366).

Crossing the border into Chaos and Order, Corwin encounters Ygg, a sentient tree who recalls not only Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, but also, by speaking when his branch is broken, the Wood of Suicides in Dante's *Inferno*. Hugi, the dark "bird of ill omen" (2: 372) who accompanies Corwin for a portion of his journey, is indebted to Hugin, one of the Norse Odin's ravens. Hugin means mind, thought, or intellect, and Hugi, who espouses a futilitarian philosophy, is a warped version of all these things. However, without Hugi's sacrifice, Corwin could never have succeeded in his mission. Hugi permits Corwin to break his neck and "eat crow" (2: 385), which gives him the strength to build a new Pattern (which in turn gives him strength to finish his journey).

Although Hugi turns out to be an asset, most of those Corwin meets in his journey desire his failure. A giant Head commands him to allow the "end of the whole foolish game" (2: 374). Corwin refuses and, perhaps recalling the prophetic verses which had been recited to him earlier, tells the Head he is going "South, to appear in a morality play" (2: 374). The Spirits of Time dance, Hugi tells him, "to celebrate your passage... they anticipate your failure. They but wish to get in a final celebration before the show is closed" (2: 376). A jackal, recalling Anubis the Egyptian jackal-headed deity, leads Corwin astray hoping to dine on the prince's "royal blood."

However, though this confused landscape of myth, poetry, and legend–recalling seemingly every Shadow that Amber has ever cast–conspires to keep him from his goal, Corwin succeeds, and ultimately Amber is preserved.

This preservation, however, returns the reader to the original question of "What is Amber?" The original assumption with which the books begin, that Amber is the one reality, and that the Shadows exist only for the use and abuse of those who can walk among them has been unsettled. The royalty of Amber seems less in control of, than controlled by, the Pattern which shapes their lives. In fact, the very name Amber recalls the expression "A fly in amber," which refers to something unimportant, preserved only because it is in association with some matter or thing of great significance. Although all roads mythic and legendary do seem to have their roots in Amber, as Corwin says, paraphrasing W.B. Yeats' "Among School Children": "Sometimes it's damned hard to tell the dancer from the dance" (2: 358).

Ygg, a sentient tree who recalls not only Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, but also, by speaking when his branch is broken, the Wood of Suicides in Dante's *Inferno*.

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Dr. Jane M. Lindskold, PhD., teaches English at Lynchburg College in Virginia, has also started writing short fiction. Look for her "Between Tomatoes and Snapdragons" in *Dragon Fantastic*, "Good Boy" in *Journeys from the Twilight Zone* and "Christmas Seal" in *Christmas Betiary*, all edited by Martin H. Greenberg.

SHADOWKNIGHT

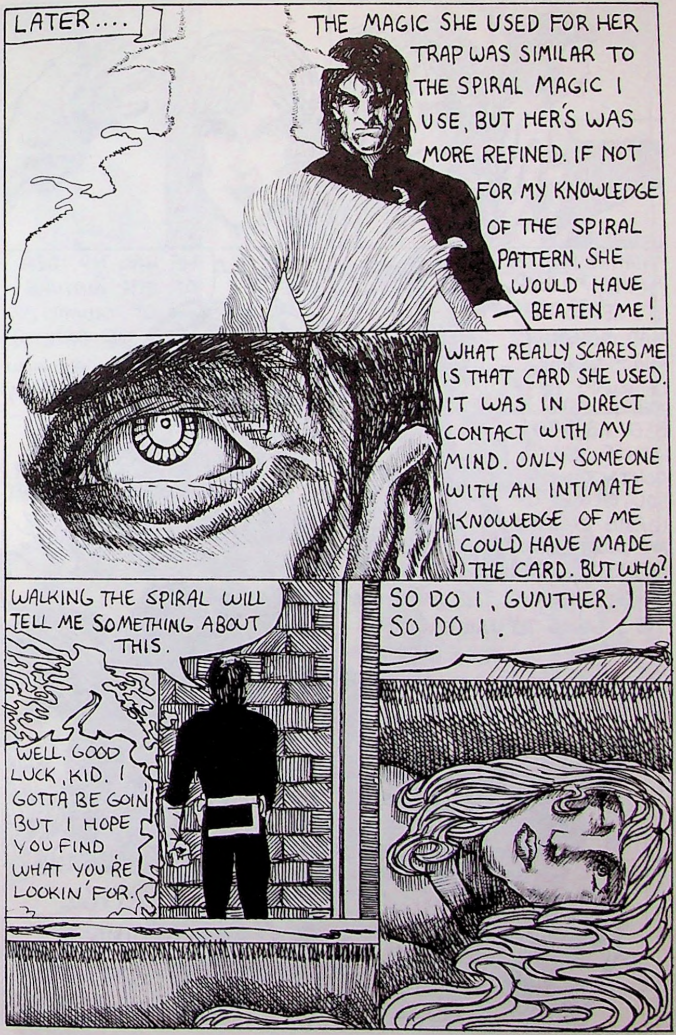
THE SPIRAL WAY

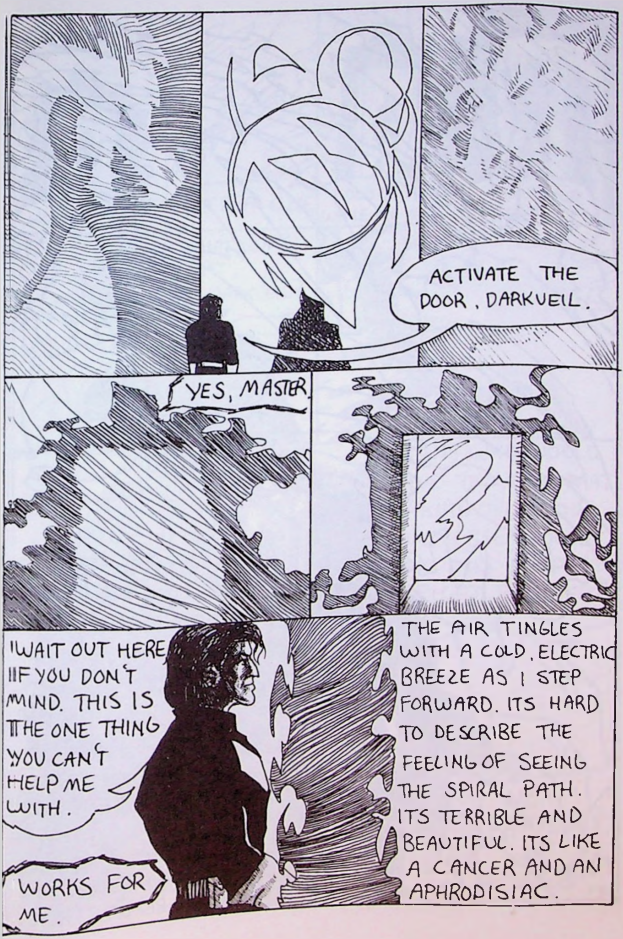
K 92'

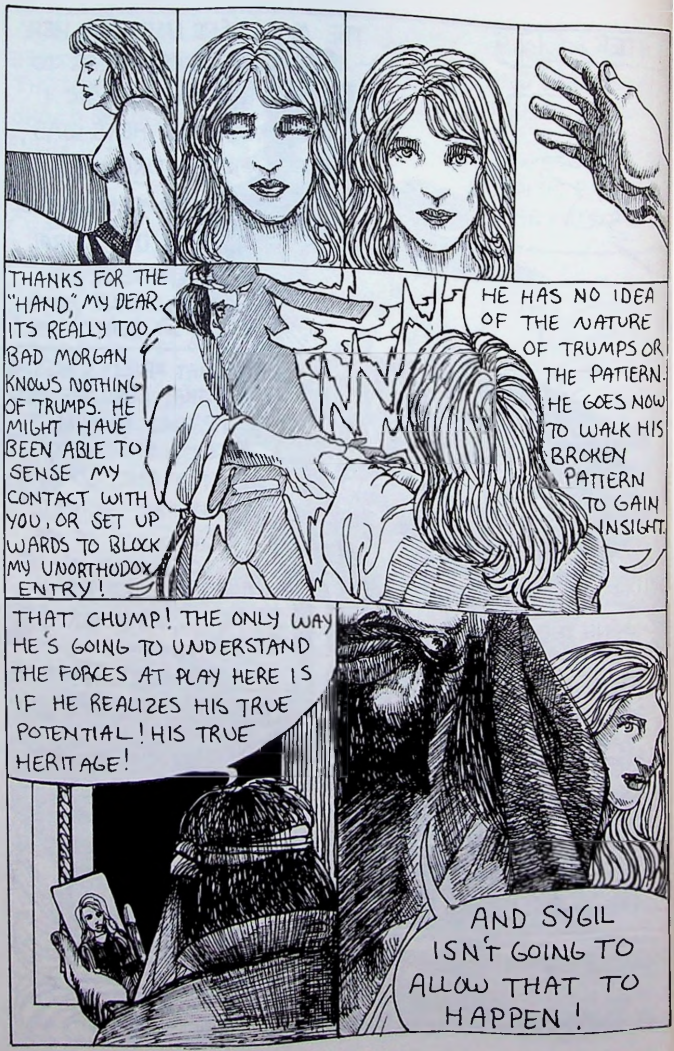
I FLOAT DOWN TO A SMALL ROCK, ADRIFT IN MY OWN SHADOW OF DEEP DARKNESS.
THE GIRL IS STILL OUT. THAT SUITS ME JUST FINE....
I'VE LIVED HERE FOR 30 YEARS. I SPENT MOST OF THE TIME TRAINING IN SORCERY AND SUPER-HEROICS. CARL AMBERSON WAS MY MENTOR.
SHADOWFAX MANOR. THE PLACE TO GO WHEN I REALLY WANT TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL.
OTHERWISE SHE WOULD FIND OUT THAT DARKVEIL IS ALSO THE GATEWAY TO THIS ENCLOSED SHADOW.
CARL TOOK OFF 5 YEARS AGO. HE LEFT ME WITH DARKVEIL AND THIS PLACE, COMPLETE WITH ITS OWN GHOSTS.
MY HOME HAS DUNGEONS, MYSTIC PORTALS, SPIRITS... NICE PLACE TO GO ON A FIRST DATE, WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?

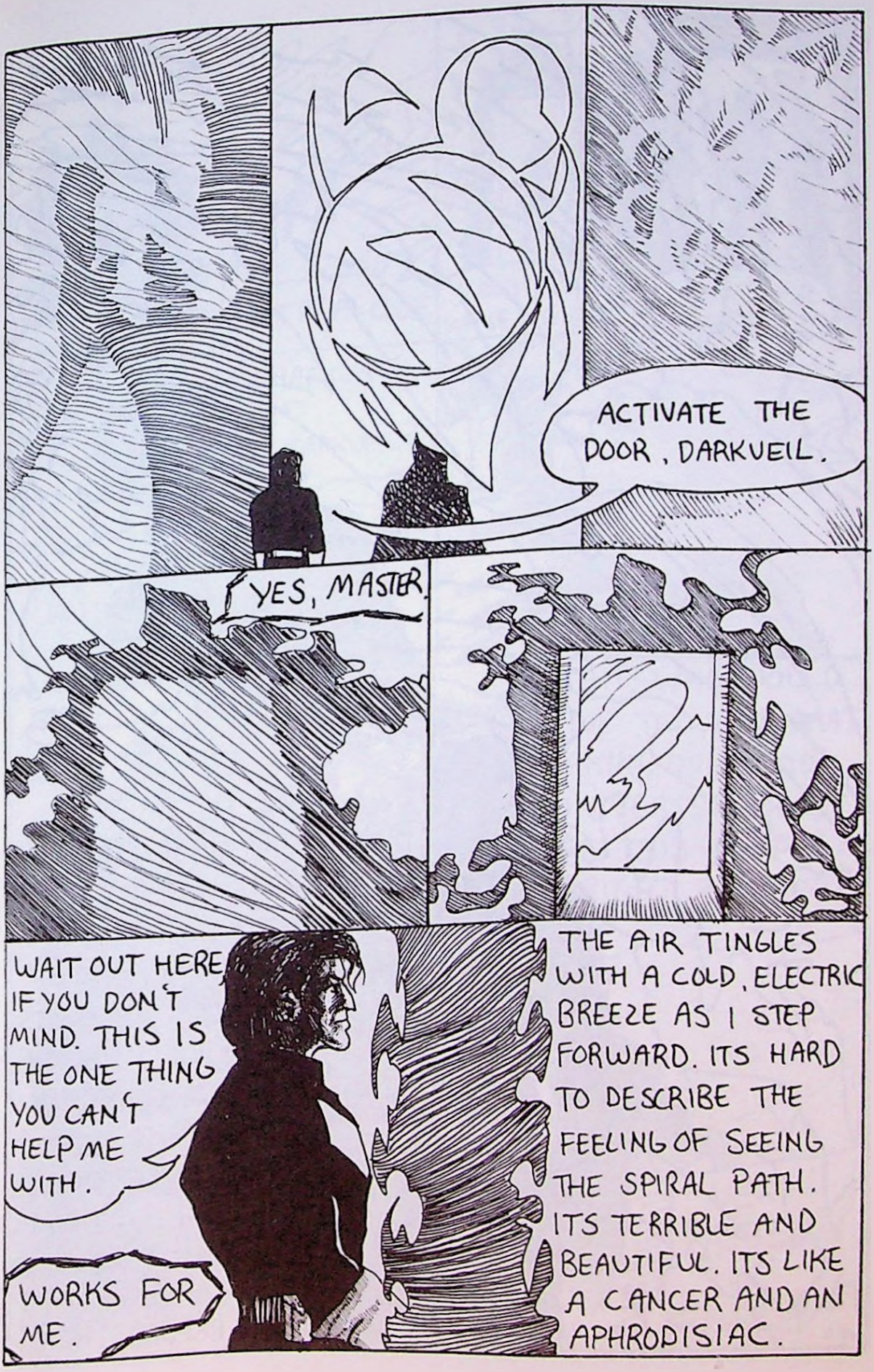
WELL, WELL.
HELLO, CARL. LONG TIME NO SEE.

ONCE SLEEPING BEAUTY WAKES UP, THE CONVERSATION SHOULD BE QUITE ENLIGHTENING, DARKVEIL.
WE HAVE COMPANY.
EVENIN', MORGAN. LOOKS LIKE YOU AND THAT BLANKET HAD A INTERESTIN' NIGHT.
GUNTHER. DIDN'T HEAR YOU COME IN.
THAT'S 'CAUSE I'M A GHOST, KID. THE REST OF THE SPIRITS TOOK OFF FOR THE SHADOWLANDS. I STUCK AROUND TO VISIT YOU.
THERE ISN'T MUCH TO SEE HERE. THE LADY AND I HAD A LITTLE ALTERCATION EARLIER, BUT I TOOK CARE OF IT.
HA!
SHE TRIED TO MELT HIS BRAIN, GUNTHER. ALMOST DID IT, WITHOUT ME THERE TO SAVE HIS ASS!
YOU'RE WALKIN' THE SPIRAL TONIGHT, MORGAN? THIS SOUNDS MIGHTY SERIOUS!
WHAT WOULD I DO WITHOUT YOU, DARKVEIL? BE A DEAR AND CHECK ON THE SPIRAL WALL, WILL YOU? WE'RE GOING IN LATER.
IT IS, GUNTHER. IF YOU HAVE SOME TIME, I'LL EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED.


LATER....
THE MAGIC SHE USED FOR HER TRAP WAS SIMILAR TO THE SPIRAL MAGIC I USE, BUT HER'S WAS MORE REFINED. IF NOT FOR MY KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPIRAL PATTERN, SHE WOULD HAVE BEATEN ME!
WHAT REALLY SCARES ME IS THAT CARD SHE USED. IT WAS IN DIRECT CONTACT WITH MY MIND. ONLY SOMEONE WITH AN INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE OF ME COULD HAVE MADE THE CARD. BUT WHO?
WALKING THE SPIRAL WILL TELL ME SOMETHING ABOUT THIS.
WELL, GOOD LUCK, KID. I GOTTA BE GOIN BUT I HOPE YOU FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKIN' FOR.
SO DO I, GUNTHER. SO DO I.


ACTIVATE THE DOOR, DARKVEIL.
YES, MASTER.
I WAIT OUT HERE IF YOU DON'T MIND. THIS IS THE ONE THING YOU CAN'T HELP ME WITH.
WORKS FOR ME.
THE AIR TINGLES WITH A COLD, ELECTRIC BREEZE AS I STEP FORWARD. ITS HARD TO DESCRIBE THE FEELING OF SEEING THE SPIRAL PATH. ITS TERRIBLE AND BEAUTIFUL. ITS LIKE A CANCER AND AN APHRODISIAC.


THANKS FOR THE "HAND," MY DEAR. ITS REALLY TOO BAD MORGAN KNOWS NOTHING OF TRUMPS. HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SENSE MY CONTACT WITH YOU, OR SET UP WARDS TO BLOCK MY UNORTHODOX ENTRY!
HE HAS NO IDEA OF THE NATURE OF TRUMPS OR THE PATTERN. HE GOES NOW TO WALK HIS BROKEN PATTERN TO GAIN INSIGHT.
THAT CHUMP! THE ONLY WAY HE'S GOING TO UNDERSTAND THE FORCES AT PLAY HERE IS IF HE REALIZES HIS TRUE POTENTIAL! HIS TRUE HERITAGE!
AND SYGIL ISN'T GOING TO ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN!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YES, MASTER.
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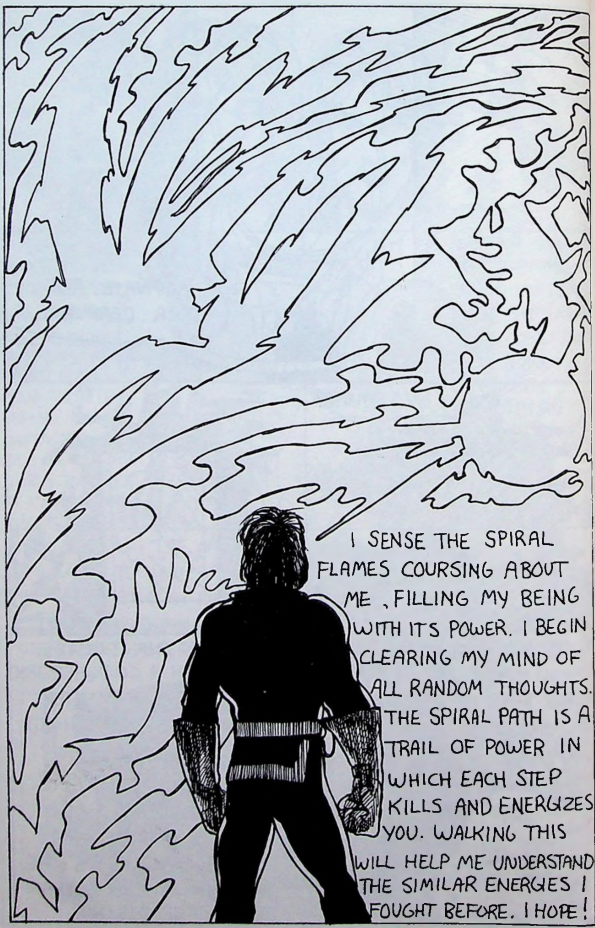

I SENSE THE SPIRAL FLAMES COURSING ABOUT ME, FILLING MY BEING WITH IT'S POWER. I BEGIN CLEARING MY MIND OF ALL RANDOM THOUGHTS. THE SPIRAL PATH IS A TRAIL OF POWER IN WHICH EACH STEP KILLS AND ENERGIZES YOU. WALKING THIS WILL HELP ME UNDERSTAND THE SIMILAR ENERGIES I FOUGHT BEFORE. I HOPE!

MORGAN?
NOPE ....
ZAP!
..BUT REAL CLOSE.
HOLD THAT POSE WHILE WE GIVE...
..HIM YOUR REGARDS!
WHAT WAS THAT, DARKVEIL?
SHIT! WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT TAKING OVER THE UNIVERSE WOULD BE THIS SIMPLE?! RIGHT, BROTHER?
NEXT: PATTERN OF FORCE!

Remembrance...

By Cathy Klessig

(An Amber Log, Based on a Scenario by Erick Wujcik)

Once upon a time, there were six kids who lived in paradise. Their father was Morgan, son of Brand, the notorious renegade Prince of Amber. Their mother was T'Pring of the Quiquearn.

Quiquearn are to wolves what humans are to chimpanzees. A skilled sorcerer, Morgan had no trouble changing himself into a Quiquearn. He lived with them, and learned to care for them, especially T'Pring, who became his mate.

He had found them in a very unpleasant Shadow, the water supply hoarded by Quiquearn-eating psionic trees. So, he led them through Shadow to a much nicer place... in fact, an ideal place for wolves. Its broad, bountiful vistas of forest and mountain had few predators. To a wolf, the new land was a giant shopping mall, with very low prices.

By the time he mated with T'Pring, Morgan had become Pack Leader of the Quiquearn. Wolf custom decrees that only the Pack Leader and his or her mate may have sex and reproduce. (Ever wonder why wolves fight so furiously for dominance? Now you know!) But Morgan, with his Amberite powers plus the immense prestige of bringing the Pack to its happy hunting ground, had no rivals. He and T'Pring soon had a litter of six: Thufir, Rudra, Morwena, Morgunt, Siggan, and Stormbringer.

As they grew, the children learned about their dual heritage. They discovered they could change themselves from wolf to human and back, at will. From Morgan's mind, they were impressed with strange images of Amber, the city at the hub of reality. Amber's strange and sinister royal family were their blood kin, they learned. But these strange aunts, uncles and cousins were dangerous, unpredictable, and usually lacking in honor. "When you grow up, I'll take you to Amber," Morgan told his children. "There, you'll walk the Pattern, and come into your powers as Amberites. But not till you're old enough to defend yourselves."

So, the children grew up between two sinister legends: the old land behind them, and Amber in the future. But, in the present, life was rich and good. All was peace and plenty... until the summer they turned thirteen.

But... who is this strange Lord of Chaos, and what does he have to do with the Quiquearn?

Morwena lay under a pine tree. She looked up into the branches, and in her imagination she let them form the image of the Pattern. The Pattern was a wondrous thing, the best part of being an Amberite. She had memorized its form, and lost herself contemplating its strange curves and lines...

It was a fine night in the Courts of Chaos. Niemand stood before his mirror, choosing his attire. The Courts were at war, but the war was far away... and that was where wars belonged. He had a reasonably prestigious post with the support forces, which never required him to travel to the actual fighting. Life was good. Tonight, perhaps, he would meet a certain lady...

Then, he got a Trump call.

He paused, considering. Trump calls were usually routine, but every once in a while the caller turned out to be an enemy. Niemand had not reached his present age by taking unnecessary chances. He was already in his Chaos form... pretty durable. He took a few moments for some preparations. Then, he allowed the Trump contact to form, sound only.

"Sir." At once, Niemand recognized the deep, utterly correct voice. It was Vagrant, Chief of Protocol for Lord Azeroth. Vagrant was a man who always, no matter his current height or position, seemed to be looking down his nose.

"Yes?" Trying for an equally detached tone, Niemand allowed the contact to form on a visual level. Now, they could both see each other. Vagrant, in his current form, was about seven feet tall and weighed a good 350 pounds. He wore scales that shimmered between green and bronze, brass and olive, in a pattern of lines that encircled his body. Over this, he wore a tuxedo vest, a black bow tie, and a glittering black G-string. If asked, he could doubtless explain at length why his form and attire were precisely suitable for the occasion.

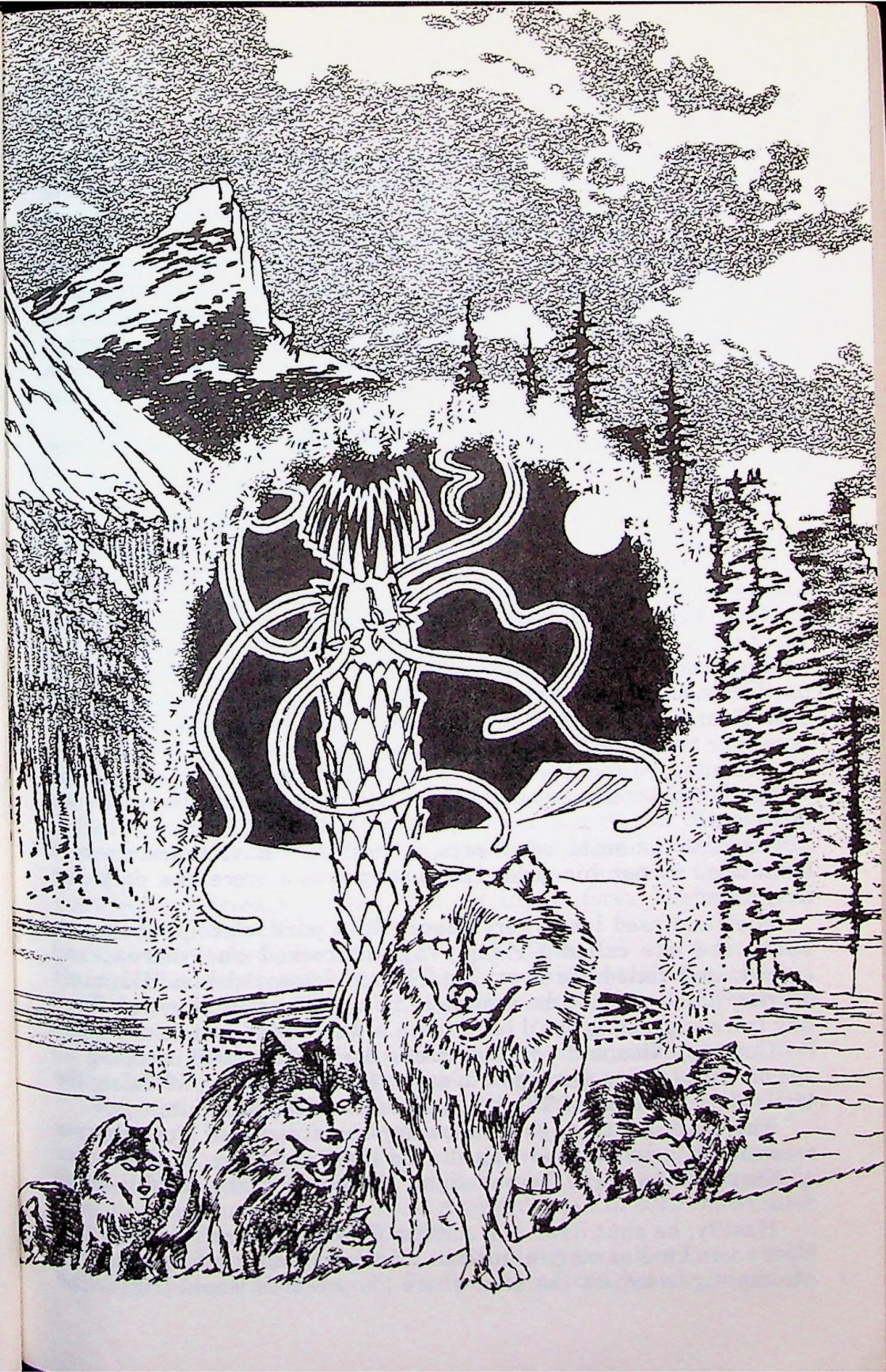
"I have been instructed to contact you." Vagrant's tone managed to imply that without instructions Vagrant would never have contacted Niemand. "It would seem that there is a matter requiring my Lord's attention, and he is not currently available. And I understand that you have something to do with this particular endeavor."

Interesting. There was a certain project, which involved both Niemand and Azeroth...

"Well, what seems to be the problem?" Niemand asked.

"If you would care to accompany me, sir, I will attempt to explain all to you." With precisely the correct gesture (taking into account their relative rank, modified by the fact that Vagrant was acting for Azeroth, plus the time of day and several other variables) Vagrant extended one hand through the contact, offering to bring Niemand to wherever Vagrant might be.

Niemand considered. The form he was wearing, and the preparations he had already made, should suffice for travelling. So he nodded, and extended his hand in return. Vagrant clasped his hand, and pulled him through, and both of them bowed slightly.



Protocol satisfied, Niemand looked around. They were in a desert region, under a glowing red sky. About half a mile away, a lone tree was standing in a pool of water. It seemed to be guarding the only water in the area. And this was not an illusion, Niemand knew.

He could feel the tree's psionic presence, even at that distance: a dark, pulling sensation. The tree was not intelligent, but its psychic attack would be powerful. Niemand could see scattered white bones at the edge of the tree's pool... former victims. This was the Shadow of the Quiquearn project, and that tree was one of the Mind-killers, which formed the environment's principal hazard. But, other than the tree, there were no living creatures in sight.

Niemand turned to Vagrant. "There seems to be some disarray, and you seem to be more aware of it than myself. Continue."

"If sir would be so kind as to focus his Logrus-sight..."

Niemand did this. He was adept at the use of the Logrus, the source of power for the Lords of Chaos. Ah, there was the problem: a Pattern-trail, leading off into Shadow. Niemand frowned. Pattern energy was out of place in this region of Shadow.

"You say that Azeroth is indisposed," he said. "Does he know about this yet?"

Vagrant shook his massive head. "Azeroth is on the field of battle, sir. I do not feel that it is an opportune time to inform him of this. Events being what they are, it will be perhaps as long as a decade or two before he discovers this."

Niemand raised his eyebrows a trifle. "I was just wondering whether you'd contacted me at his instructions, or under your own initiative."

Vagrant remained, as always, unruffled. "I have taken my own initiative, as per his prior instructions. You were the only one available."

Niemand used his powers to scan for a particular Quiquearn he knew: the one called T'Pring. Vagrant cocked an eyebrow, and sighed, and rolled his eyes, but Niemand ignored him. Hmmm... T'Pring didn't seem to be anywhere in that Shadow. Nor was there any trace suggesting she'd been there in the recent past.

Curious, Niemand began to trace the Pattern-trail, keeping an eye on its intensity. He began to move through Shadow, following the trail, alert for signs of T'Pring. And Vagrant followed him.

The trail cut through Shadow for some distance. Its progress was rather jagged and awkward. And then, suddenly, in the center of Niemand's circle of Logrus sight, there occurred a bright, white flare.

Hastily, he shut down the contact. The flare disappeared. It had been some kind of magical attack. He tried again, probing gingerly, attempting to bypass the area where his presence would trigger the

attack. But, as he circled, the white flare struck again.

Once more, he shut down the contact. This time, he'd gotten a better look. The magic of the flare was Pattern-powered. Not a natural phenomenon... it had been deliberately set there, like a deadfall above a forest path. Whoever had made it seemed to resent being followed.

Niemand turned to Vagrant. "Well, you brought me here. Apparently you know something about this, other than the overt appearance; otherwise, you wouldn't have contacted me. Tell me what you know."

Vagrant's eyebrows drew together, very slightly. "I brought you here so that we may possibly work on this together. If it's not too much to ask."

"No."

"Very well, sir."

"Then, would you care to watch, for now? Unless you have some other ideas?"

"I believe that there is no way, having investigated this via the Logrus, to pass the barrier through Shadow, other than cloaking ourselves in some way and actually passing through."

Niemand considered this. "Well, would you care to go the long route, or would you like to go up just prior to that the quick way?"

"The quick way would be fine."

"Okay. Would you like to do the honors, or should I?"

Vagrant bowed infinitesimally. "If you will."

Niemand reached out to a point just prior to the barrier, and pulled them both through. It was another desert region: if anything, it was even more barren than the land of the Mind-killers. The sun was high in the sky, creating levels of heat and radiation that would quickly have fried a human. But, in Chaos form, Niemand was merely reminded of a day at the beach.

Vagrant looked around, and quickly pointed out a pathway through Shadow. It seemed to be the same Pattern-trail as before.

"I believe this is our path," Vagrant remarked... as if Niemand could somehow have missed it.

"Do you have any preparations you wish to make to protect yourself?" Niemand asked. "Would you like me to assist you?"

Vagrant reached under his vest, and pulled out what looked like an amulet. "I believe this will protect both of us through this area."

Niemand scanned the amulet with the Logrus. He had an immediate impression that the amulet was a power object, made by Azeroth. Niemand tended to trust Azeroth's skill in such matters, so he nodded. "Then, let's go," he said.

Vagrant held up the amulet, activated it somehow, and strode forward. Niemand followed. The power of the amulet could be

clearly felt, providing protection against Pattern. It created a Patternless area, and Vagrant and Niemand walked through the trap, untouched.

On the way through, Niemand took a close look at the trap. It seemed that someone -- someone with strong Pattern-powers -- had actually manipulated the edges of a certain Shadow, creating a kind of interference pattern of Pattern itself. In essence, it was a barrier, all the way around the Shadow. Niemand felt sure that, having analyzed the trap, he could find a way to get through it by himself, should he ever wish to pass it without Vagrant.

Now, Niemand and Vagrant were within the barred Shadow. It occurred to Niemand that, since the trap did not seem to provide for any exits, whoever had created the bar was probably still in the Shadow.

Niemand looked at Vagrant. "Do you have any further suggestions, or should I continue to look?"

"Perhaps sir would like to do what he did before?"

Niemand nodded. That was what he'd been planning. First, he used his powers to scan the Shadow. Ahh... there were several Quiquearn here. Yes, eighteen of them. And... what was this? One of them had Pattern?

Niemand formed an image of the strange Quiquearn. Not a Quiquearn he'd seen before. A large male, with pure white fur. And, yes, definitely with Pattern.

Very, very interesting. Pattern hadn't been any part of the Quiquearn project. What was the strange wolf up to? Niemand settled in to watch.

Four days' easy travel southeast of the main Pack Ground, Morwena lay under a pine tree. She looked up into the branches, and in her imagination she let them form the image of the Pattern. The Pattern was a wondrous thing, the best part of being an Amberite. She had memorized its form, and would often lose herself in contemplating its strange curves and lines. But she couldn't really *use* it. First, she had to go to Amber and walk the original Pattern. Sometimes, knowing the wonderful destiny in store for her, she could hardly wait.

With a happy sigh, she let the vision of the Pattern dissolve. That was enough for now. She had set out with Alphaz, to explore the southern mountains. It was time to get moving.

She got up and stretched. One day, her crystal-blue eyes and cream-colored fur might make her beautiful, or at least striking. Right now, though, she was in the skinny stage of adolescence, all bones and rather clumsy. She looked around, and saw Alphaz

worrying a bone from a rabbit he'd caught.

'That rabbit's about had it,' Morwena remarked. 'Want to move on?'

'Sure. Let's go.' He got up, shaking himself. Of all the Pack, Alphaz was the friendliest. He was not the smartest, or the best hunter. But Morwena didn't care about that. Since she'd been old enough to travel, he'd taken her on journeys spanning half a continent. She loved him dearly.

They started off. It was a hilly area, thickly wooded. The day was fine.

Then Alphaz stopped, sniffing the air, so Morwena stopped too. Yes, both of them could smell it now... a family of wild pigs, just over the rise to their right.

Morwena reached out with her mind, and felt the simple, piggish minds. There were about fifteen of them, and they were strangely agitated. Then, abruptly, one of those minds just... *died*, sharp and sudden. Flashed out. Gone.

She flashed a picture of the pig's death to Alphaz, and added, 'Let's circle over there from downwind, and see what's happening.'

Alphaz was disturbed. 'Add my mind to yours,' he suggested. 'Let's take a look, together.'

Morwena did this. Alphaz's psyche wasn't very strong, but in the link they had more range and sensitivity. The minds of the pigs jumped into stronger focus. Then, another pig-mind flashed out, and was gone. The rest of the pigs were in panic; Morwena/Alphaz couldn't get a clear visual image. And there was no trace of any creature's mind, except the pigs.

'What's doing that?' Morwena worried. 'What could kill like that?'

'I don't know.' Alphaz was worried, too. 'How *could* you kill an animal that fast?'

'Ahh... magic? The Pattern? There's *something* weird going on. Let's scout the area.'

Alphaz was dubious, but he agreed. Cautiously, the two wolves circled around the rise, approaching the pigs from downwind.

As they topped the rise, they caught a trace of another scent.

'What's that?' Alphaz asked. Mind-link was great for scouting. They could "talk" all they wanted, and never make a sound.

'A *horse*.' Startled, Morwena sent him an image of a horse, with a human on its back. 'I've never smelled one either, but I recognize it from my father's memories. There must be humans here... maybe Amberites. Time for some serious stealth.'

She moved forward, like a white ghost between the trees. Alphaz had his doubts, but he followed. After about a hundred yards, they came across hoof-prints in the dirt, heading off at an angle.

Morwena started following the tracks, offside on the downwind side. But Alphaz halted.

'Wait. I think we should get out of here. There's only two of us.'

Morwena paused, still intent on the tracks. 'If there's something in our territory --'

'Yeah,' he interrupted. 'Let's get outa here and *tell* them about it.'

Morwena considered. 'I'll tell you what. You go back to the Pack and tell them. I'll try and get a report on what it is.'

Alphaz growled, low in his mind. 'You *will* come back, *now!*' he ordered.'

Morwena turned her head, and stared at him. She'd never seen Alphaz so angry. And he *never* pulled rank on her... he tended to follow her lead. But here he was, giving orders, with all the authority of an adult speaking to a cub.

'Well, don't get mad at *me*,' she protested. 'I want to see what this is.'

'Yeah! Let's go back... we'll come back with a bunch of us. Let's get outa here!'

'By that time, it could've killed off all the game around here!'

'Yeah, so what? I'm supposed to walk back in to your father, and say I left you here? For*get* it. Let's go!'

Morwena sighed, and gave in. 'You've got a point. I don't want to get you in trouble. All right.'

They withdrew the same way they had come, moving silently till they were a good distance away. Then, they started running.

Morwena was still fretting. 'This is bad. I don't like running away. I wish I had a quick way of getting ahold of Dad... like the things Amberites use. It's gonna take us two *days* to get home. Alphaz, we can't just leave this thing here, in our woods.'

'Why not?'

'Because these are our woods!'

But Alphaz took a more practical view. 'Yeah, and we're two days away from any help. How many men on horses do you think we could take? And those minds snapped out real suddenly. How do you suppose that was? And we didn't even pick up on a *horse's* mind.'

Morwena frowned mentally. 'Yeah. If I could feel its mind, then maybe I'd be able to fight it. But, as it is... all right, we'll go home.'

'Good.'

Morwena, at thirteen, lacked the strength and endurance of an adult wolf. She was the slower of the two, by far. Alphaz pushed her at the fastest pace she could sustain. But she didn't complain. The strange deaths had made the familiar forest feel threatening. Despite her brave words about checking it out, she wanted very badly to get home.

After awhile, a thought occurred to her. 'Alphaz, you're faster. You go on ahead.'

'No.'

'I will follow you.'

'No!'

'I will not sneak back there.'

'No!'

'I promise, Alphaz!'

'No! No! No!' He dropped behind her, almost as if he were herding her.

Morwena was hurt. She was very touchy about keeping promises. Morgan had told her many stories about Amberites, and how most of them had no honor. She was determined never to be that way, and it scalded for Alphaz to doubt her.

'You don't believe me, do you?'

'I believe you.'

'Well then, why are you back there?'

'Because I want to make sure you keep moving.'

Morwena muttered in her mind, low but clearly audible. 'Grownups!' she sulked. 'Grownups are so damn... so... *contrary!*'

Siggan and Stormbringer had never killed a bear. But, at thirteen, they were sure they were ready. So, they had persuaded Leggamore and Falway to teach them, and the party of four had set out to the northwest, where bears could be found.

They were running along through the deep forest. The Pack Ground was four days behind them. They'd traveled slowly, scouting carefully, literally out for bear. They had already scented several bears, but each time, Falway had looked at the situation and forbidden them to attack. In each case, the bear would've had the tactical advantage. Siggan and Storm were getting very frustrated at being told no, over and over again. But Falway just kept repeating firmly, 'You do not attack a bear, when the bear has the ground.'

Storm finally began to suspect that Falway's heart was not in the hunt. In one sunlit, green clearing, he stopped and confronted her. Falway and Siggan also stopped, but Leggamore kept going, scouting the land ahead.

'Are you sure you really want to do this?' Storm asked Falway.

'It's a good way to teach you guys a thing or two,' she answered calmly.

Siggan looked at Storm scornfully. 'Are you hoping she'll bail you out?'

Storm looked very superior, as only a thirteen-year-old can. 'I'm not worried about me. I know Leggamore can handle himself, and

so can Falway. But, Sig, you're sort of puny...'

'I beg your pardon!?' Siggan exclaimed indignantly. She glared at him. Both of them knew she could take him.

'Well, not puny,' Storm admitted. 'But you're not that strong, physically.'

'But I've got my *mind*, man. I've got a hot brain,' Siggan boasted. And it was true, she was already one of the Pack's stronger minds.

'That's one good thing,' Storm had to concede. 'Bears, though, are strong, physically.'

But Siggan was not to be deterred. 'Hot brain, taste for blood, and a whole lot of motivation,' she bragged.

At that moment, Leggamore came trotting back. But, as he approached, Falway bristled and snarled at him.

Astonished, Siggan probed Falway's mind for an explanation. Leggamore was Falway's own beloved mate: why would she snarl at him? But Siggan couldn't get any explanation. Falway's mind had become a blank wall, plastered with KEEP OUT signs.

Everything seemed normal. The woods were serene, with no enemy in sight, smell, or mind range. Leggamore seemed perfectly normal. In fact, he was in a really happy, panting mood, and he offered to link minds with Siggan and Storm. Wanting an explanation, they accepted, and formed a three-way rapport.

'There's one wounded, just over the ridge there!' Leggamore announced. 'Follow me! Storm to my left, Siggan to my right. Come on!' And he turned, and ran back toward the ridge.

Storm started to follow, but Siggan did not move. 'Wait a minute!' she projected.

Leggamore stopped, and turned to face her. 'What?' he demanded impatiently.

'If that's all it is, why is Falway closed? She wouldn't close down because there's a bear wounded in the area. Before we lose our minds hunting this thing...'

Leggamore looked at Falway, surprise written all over his body and mind. 'I dunno. Go smell her. What's wrong with her?'

Siggan tried again to reach Falway's mind. 'Falway...?' But Falway's mind remained shut.

Siggan considered trying to break through Falway's mental wall. She was sure she could do it, but she didn't want to hurt Falway. So she sent a thought to Storm and Leggamore: 'Stay put. Stay near. I'm going to scan, and see if I can find it. She doesn't want to tell me, but whatever it is has freaked her badly.'

'What's she defending against?' Storm asked. 'There's nothing around here, except us and a couple squirrels.'

'I don't know,' Siggan answered tersely.

A wolf howled, off to the north, where Leggamore had wanted to

lead them. It wasn't a distress call... just a call that meant, 'I'm over here!'

'Who can that be?' Siggan asked. 'I don't recognize the voice.'

'Me either,' Storm agreed.

Leggamore piped up, 'Oh, I forgot to tell you, I ran into some other wolves from out west.'

'Then why don't we recognize the call?' asked Siggan.

Leggamore shrugged mentally. 'It's been a long time. People change. And you were pretty young when they left.'

'But, why don't I feel any minds over there?' Siggan pursued.

Leggamore shrugged again. 'Must be too far. Come on, let's go!' And, once again, he wheeled and started up the ridge.

But Siggan turned to Falway. Shaping her thoughts very distinctly, she tried projecting them at Falway's mental shield: 'Falway, are you coming?'

But the thought just bounced.

Worried, Siggan turned to the others. 'We can't leave her here.'

Suddenly, Falway charged at Leggamore, snarling. Siggan leaped between them, and Falway paused, unwilling to run Siggan down. But she was still snarling. All the fur on her back was up. Then she leaped again, dashing around to avoid Siggan.

Siggan felt desperate. Something had apparently possessed Falway, and was making her attack Leggamore. Siggan *had* to get through to Falway's mind. She formed her thoughts into a sharp probe, and launched it at Falway's defenses: 'Falway! Falway, it's me!'

She felt Leggamore join in her effort, through the already-existing link. In fact, he was pulling Siggan along with him. Alarmed, Storm dropped out of the rapport: Leggamore should not have such a psyche. But Siggan stayed with it, and she and Leggamore crashed through Falway's defences.

Falway skittered to a halt, whimpering. Siggan tried to back off, to keep from hurting Falway. But, Leggamore was still pressing the attack! Only, now that she was inside Falway's mind, Siggan could see Falway didn't believe this was Leggamore.

Siggan was astonished beyond belief. But one fact shone clear through all her confusion: whether this was Leggamore or not, Siggan couldn't let him trash Falway's mind. So, Siggan put everything she had into breaking the contact. It broke, with an almost audible "**snap!**" Both Siggan and Falway were dazed for a second.

Storm had caught just enough of the exchange to know Leggamore must be stopped. He charged at Leggamore, and Leggamore wheeled to meet him... Leggamore, one of the Pack's best fighters. To Storm, as a half-grown youngster, Leggamore

looked huge.

Storm did something that spoke more for his courage than his brains: he kept charging. He dived straight at Leggamore, who waited with teeth bared, not seeming at all dazed like Siggan and Falway. Then, at the last moment, Storm leaped as hard as he could, right *over* Leggamore.

Recovering, Siggan looked up, and saw a wolf come running out of the woods. It was... Leggamore! Siggan stared in confusion from one Leggamore to the other.

Storm was too busy to notice the other Leggamore. The Blood of Amber had served him well: his leap was truly epic. But Leggamore reached up, and snapped at his belly. He missed... and in that moment, both Storm and Siggan realized something. Falway was right, this wasn't Leggamore. The real Leggamore would have nailed Storm, but this wolf was a little slow.

Siggan almost dashed in from behind the false Leggamore, to join Storm's attack. Then she thought better of it. This was a full-sized adult. She'd better stick to psyche.

She formed the hardest, sharpest probe she'd ever made -- no nonsense this time about being gentle -- and bored straight into his mind. She was completely mad with rage: Storm tried to join her attack, but she didn't even notice. She went in alone. And at once, she found herself in trouble. This wolf's psyche was greater than hers. No, she thought, with a small and irrelevant part of her mind, this certainly was *not* Leggamore.

Since he couldn't help Siggan, Storm continued to bait the larger wolf. Snarling, he circled to the left, and charged. He used his best speed, and went for the hindquarters. But the enemy wheeled, faster than Storm could circle.

Even though her psyche was less than her foe's, Siggan still attacked. If she could at least distract him, she might give Storm a chance. But, she found herself in full contact. Suddenly, the enemy's mind was inside her defenses. She was stopped cold. Then she realized, he was better than she was, but not overwhelmingly. So, she put everything she had into an effort to break the contact.

Meanwhile, Storm kept dancing around the false Leggamore. And the real Leggamore, and Falway, took up flanking positions. But they didn't charge. They seemed to be linking their minds together.

Storm kept circling, keeping the fake Leggamore's attention. If he could just get around to the enemy's rear...

Desperately, Siggan managed to shove the enemy out of her mind. And, as soon as she was free, she got an invitation to link with the real Leggamore and Falway. She took it. Storm got the same invitation, and took it also. The bond of four wolves was far

more powerful than the false Leggamore. Mentally and physically, they now had him outnumbered.

He leaped past Storm, and started running. But Siggan, gloating, realized there was no way he could escape. She had the strongest mind in the psychic bond, so she was in control. She formed the group-mind into a sizzling spearhead of mental energy, and threw it straight at the false Leggamore.

He'd had the edge, when he'd faced only Siggan... but no way could he face the four of them. His defences were crumbling. In another moment, he'd be helpless.

Then he did a strange thing. He -- *activated* something -- and suddenly, there was a wall around his mind. It was like a hard, smooth shell, and the Pack's attack just bounced off. Meanwhile, he kept running toward the ridge.

'Let's get him!' Siggan raged. 'Let's bring him down and *kill* him!' And she charged away, after him.

The group-mind was under her control. They all poised to follow her lead, and Leggamore took off, running after her.

But a thin, cold sliver of thought occurred to Storm. 'No!' he objected. 'Let's go back, and tell Dad there's some stranger in the woods.'

Siggan kept running. Clear image, in her mind: she was going to get this wolf, and bury her teeth in his throat, and yank out his entrails, and --

'Hold it, *hold* it!' Falway's mind shrieked. 'You're going in the direction he wanted us to go in the first place!'

That thought pierced Siggan's blood-lust, like a garden-hose turned on a camp-fire. She skidded to an abrupt halt, and ran back to the group. She radiated bitter frustration, but she could see that Falway was right. Leggamore, who had started to follow Siggan, also turned back, a little sheepish.

The enemy slowed down a little, as he came to the top of the ridge. Now, they could all see he was tempting them to follow. But they weren't about to do it. After a moment, he seemed to realize this. Suddenly, he vanished. He did not run over the crest and disappear behind it: he just vanished.

Siggan and Storm and Leggamore and Falway just stared, for a long moment, at the place where he'd disappeared. Then Storm piped up, 'Like I said, I think we should fall back, and tell the rest of the Pack.'

Leggamore agreed soberly. 'If we run like hell, considering Storm's and Siggan's pace, we can make it back in about two days.'

'Let's go.' Storm was eager. Who knew when the enemy might come back, with reinforcements?

Siggan trotted over to Falway, panting. 'Wait a minute, wait a

minute. Falway, what was that? Who was that? Do you know? Leggamore?

'It must have been one of the shape-shifters that your father speaks of,' Falway replied thoughtfully.

'How could you make that barrier?' Storm mused. 'I mean, Dad's shared his memories with us, but I still can't tell.'

'Secondhand memories aren't the same, I guess,' Siggan reflected.

'Yeah. It's not the same as really knowing magic, or how to use the Pattern,' Storm concluded in frustration. 'And we don't even know what kind of creature that was. It looked just like Leggamore, and felt like Leggamore...'

'I opened my mind to him, and I thought it was Leggamore,' added Siggan.

'I've never known anything like that. That's kind of scary,' Storm admitted, with a shudder. 'But Falway knew, right off the bat. Falway, how did you know, when we didn't?'

Falway gave a mental shrug. 'He didn't run like Leggamore. Don't get too dependent on your mind. Use your eyes.'

Storm was merely puzzled. It seemed to him that all wolves ran more or less alike. 'You're gonna have to show me the differences,' he told Falway.

'Sure, but later. Right now, we need to get outa here.'

Without further conversation, they all wheeled, and ran back the way they'd come. Two days away was home... and, hopefully, safety.

Rudra lay in the warm sun, next to the central clearing of the Pack Ground. He was in wolf form. The Pack had twelve adult members, with Rudra and his brothers and sisters forming a sort of junior auxiliary. Eight of the Pack's adults were within sight or scent, from where Rudra lay. But Rudra felt no desire for company.

He was bored. All five of his brothers and sisters were gone. Thufir and Morgunt were around somewhere, perhaps... but Rudra's interest in finding either of them ran well into negative numbers. About four days ago, Siggan and Stormbringer had coaxed two of the adults, Leggamore and Falway, into taking them out to hunt bear. And, about the same time, Morwena had gone off somewhere with old Alphaz. Rudra's father, Morgan, had also disappeared, which was typical.

Rudra lay in the warm sun, thinking about shape-changing. Of all his siblings, he was most skilled at that art. But today, it occurred to him that he had never taken the shape of a fish. Neither had any of the others, as far as he knew. Was it possible?

Roused by the challenge, Rudra jumped up and trotted off to the

north. After a few miles' pleasant run through the familiar green woods, he came to the shore of the Great Lake.

He spent the afternoon jumping into the water, trying to change himself into a fish. But several hours later, he crawled out onto the bank, once more in wolf form, and gasping from his latest attempt. Water-breathing wasn't as easy as fish made it look.

As his breathing returned to normal, Rudra realized he was hungry. He decided to catch a fish. This would satisfy his hunger, and at the same time restore his sense of mammalian superiority.

He crept quietly to the bank, crouched, and waited. After awhile, that got boring, so he used his psychic powers to speed things up. His psyche was not among the Pack's strongest... but then, fish were not a lot of competition. He projected an image of a bunch of fat, succulent tadpoles, right under the bank where Rudra was lying.

That got things moving, all right. A nice, big fish, maybe fifteen or eighteen pounds, came gliding along the bottom toward the illusory tadpoles. When it got close enough–surprise!–Rudra leaped in and nailed it.

Rudra came up, cursing in his mind. He had the fish firmly in his mouth. But, he'd also bitten his tongue.

He leaped to the bank, and flipped the fish away from the water. Then he planted a paw firmly on the squirming fish, so it couldn't flop back into the water. Then, he just stood there for a minute, concentrating on fixing his bitten tongue. After a minute, he was as good as new. Being a shape-changer was really handy sometimes.

The fish was flopping and writhing: its air-breathing was even worse than Rudra's water-breathing, Rudra noted with satisfaction. If it hadn't squirmed so much, he might not have bitten his tongue in the first place. He took his paw off it, and whacked it, hard. Dumb fish! Then he started to *eat* it. That ought to teach it!

He picked at the fish for some time, delicately avoiding the bones. He decided it had really been a good idea after all, to go fishing.

But then, suddenly, he got a psychic impression. Somebody was watching him.

He sniffed the air. His nose swelled a little. He brought it back to normal, and sniffed again. Ah, that was better. There was another wolf in the area. It was Q'uiesrim, a female, Rudra's best friend among the Pack's young adults. But, there was another smell, too... something catlike. Not a mountain lion, but related. He could only get a trace of its scent, not enough to tell him where it was. He was still right next to the lank, and the lake smells were too strong.

Rudra looked around surreptitiously. But he couldn't see anything catlike. Then he opened himself up psychically, and got a clear impression of Q'uiesrim, lying under a tree on a nearby hill. She seemed to be occupied, looking down at something. He

established a mind link.

'Whatcha lookin' at?' he thought.

Q'uiesrim answered in a mental whisper, 'Shh. It's listening.'

Quietly, Rudra asked, 'Listening psychically?'

'Yes, stupid. Shh.'

He continued to listen. He also continued to eat his fish. He kept getting whiffs of the subtle, cat scent. But he couldn't feel its mind, which bothered him.

Q'uiesrim was nervous, too. She stayed very quiet, watching. She couldn't really see anything. She was looking at a pool of shadow, getting occasional scents of that same cat-like smell. The shadow was between Rudra and Q'uiesrim, only about a hundred feet from Rudra, a little way up the bank.

Rudra cast about with mind and nose, but he couldn't find any other Pack members. They were probably back at the Pack Ground, a couple of miles away.

He waded out into the lake, carrying what was left of the fish. Cautiously, he worked his was through the weeds, nearer to Q'uiesrim. He gave the patch of shadow a wide berth.

When he moved past it, the cat-thing broke from cover. Rudra still couldn't see it, but Q'uiesrim saw it clearly, and Rudra got a good look through the mind-link: a huge, black cat, about nine feet from nose to tail. It was a lot bigger than a mountain lion, and more powerfully built.

Presently, Rudra came to a point where he had to leave the lake, if he wanted to head for Q'uiesrim. He climbed up the bank, threw the rest of his fish to the ground, and kept going. Hopefully, the cat would be distracted by the fish. Cats liked fish, didn't they? But there wasn't much of the fish left, by this time.

The cat ignored the fish, and kept following Rudra. With a little pang of alarm, Rudra realized it was stalking him. It seemed to be working its way into charging range. And he still couldn't feel its mind, which made the whole thing kind of spooky. Everything–even a tadpole–had some kind of psychic presence. But on a mental level, the cat just didn't seem to be there.

Pretending nonchalance, Rudra kept moving. Q'uiesrim was definitely worried. She started moving along the hill, trying to get closer to Rudra. Rudra angled up toward her a bit, and the cat kept sneaking along between them.

Then the cat settled back on its haunches, winding up for a charge toward Rudra. Q'uiesrim screamed in the mind link, 'Break for it!' At the same time, she started running toward the cat, and she gave out with one of the loudest howls Rudra'd ever heard.

The cat jumped, startled. Its charge was spoiled. It whirled on Q'uiesrim. Then it slunk into some bushes, and disappeared.

Through the mind-link, Rudra told Q'uiesrim, 'You're gonna intercept it, and I can turn around, and–'

'Run!' Q'uiesrim ordered.

'Run?!' Rudra didn't want to leave her there alone.

'*Run!*' she insisted. 'Get the hell out of here! Run! Go get the others!'

She had a point. Rudra took off at full speed, making a wide angle around the place where the cat had disappeared. He would go and get the Pack. Then they'd show that thing!

But as he ran, he suddenly heard a loud snarl. Then there was the thump of two bodies colliding. Rudra stopped. He'd probably have to run at least a mile, before he'd get within psychic range of the Pack. How could Q'uiesrim fight this thing alone, long enough for Rudra to return with help?

The answer was obvious: she couldn't. She was sacrificing herself, so Rudra could escape. The thought was intolerable. Rudra wheeled, and dashed back toward the combat.

He saw Q'uiesrim spin away from the cat. Her side was streaked with blood. The cat whirled toward her, blindingly fast. She backed away, but she was favoring her right front leg. She wasn't going to make it.

Rudra charged, streaking in on the cat's blind side, from its rear flank. As he ran, he saw the cat lash out with its claws. Q'uiesrim barely managed to duck. Then it pulled back into a crouch, getting ready to spring.

The cat's neck was solid, massive muscle: not an inviting target. Rudra went for a hind leg, hoping to hamstring it. He leaped. But somehow, the cat sensed his presence. It wheeled toward him, and his jaws snapped on thin air.

Before the cat could strike Rudra, Q'uiesrim dashed in behind it. Her teeth slashed at its shoulder. Rudra rolled and spun, and leaped toward the cat again.

'**Run!!!**' Q'uiesrim ordered.

Rudra hesistated. The habit of a wolf-cub to obey an adult was strong. But he couldn't leave her there to die. The thing had stopped cloaking its mind, and he could feel its psyche, about as strong as his own. It wasn't very intelligent... but its thoughts clear enough. Strong images of a red, mangled Q'uiesrim. How could Rudra run away, and let those images become real? But if he stayed, there might be two mangled corpses...

Meanwhile, Morgan had gone to a little mountain valley, far to the south. It was a pretty place, and private. He was the only one of the Pack who could teleport, using the Pattern. So, he used this valley

for his private experiments with the Pattern and with magic.

But this time, when he blipped into the valley, he could tell right away that something was wrong. Somebody'd been there, messing with his experiments. Nothing was visibly wrong. But the instant he appeared, he got the sensation of a different kind of structure... a strange, shuddery feeling.

Then, something vibrated off the Pattern, which Morgan was maintaining in his mind. Just a touch... something else with Pattern had contacted Morgan's Pattern, and then withdrawn.

The touch was too fleeting to identify. It could be any of his relatives from Amber, or it could be an outsider. Either way, it was bad news, because this Shadow was Morgan's private retreat. No one was supposed to know about it.

He made another Pattern transit, back to the shore of the Great Lake. As soon as he did so, he heard a *yowl*, a cat-noise that no wolf could make. And there was a loud snarling, like a couple of wolves in a serious fight.

He turned, and sprinted toward the sound. With his Amberite strength, he sailed easily over patches of brush: in wolf form, it was easy to catch his balance. He was really moving. As he ran, he flickered in and out of Shadow, so that when he arrived, the enemy wouldn't see him.

Rudra had made his choice. On the level of muscle, the cat-thing far outclassed him. But, mentally, he might be able to take it. That decided him. He couldn't abandon Q'uiesrim, if he had a chance to save her. He grappled its mind, boring straight through its defenses.

Through the mind-link, Q'uiesrim added her power to Rudra's. But the cat's defenses were surprisingly tough, and they couldn't break through. Neither of them was a psychic heavyweight. All they could do was distract the cat, make it harder for the cat to attack them.

It wheeled, throwing Q'uiesrim off like some pesky insect. It gathered itself again, to leap. But Rudra leaped first. He threw himself against its body, and ruined its attack. He bounced away, and danced back, wondering what the hell to do next. He and Q'uiesrim were in deep trouble. What else was there to do, but keep fighting?

But, just as he reached this gloomy conclusion, Morgan leaped into view around a stand of pines. In all his life, Rudra had never been so happy to see his father.

Morgan was still a hundred feet away. But, instantly, he offered a mind-link to Rudra. He had to stop phasing through Shadow to do this, but he felt it was well worth it. Rudra and Q'uiesrim combined

their mental power with Morgan's and the three of them hit the cat with a go-for-broke mental blitzkreig.

The cat reeled, but then it rallied. They were hurting it. But subduing it would take time. And it was wheeling back toward Q'uiesrim. Before they could immobilize its mind, it might kill her.

'Rudra, move around toward Q'uiesrim!' Morgan ordered tensely.

'You got it, Dad!' Rudra started to circle the cat. Q'uiesrim needed the relief: she was trying to back away, but she was bleeding badly, and her limp was worse. As Rudra came near her, the cat tensed to leap. Its yellow eyes glared, fixed on Q'uiesrim, and it charged. There was no way she could move fast enough to evade.

Desperately, Rudra leaped at the cat, biting at its haunch and trying to break its charge. But it kept moving, leaped on Q'uiesrim, and knocked her over. Its jaws closed on her foreleg, right where she'd been nailed before. A nasty, grating pain scored deep, jagged lines in Rudra's mind through the mind-link. She was trying to bite back at the cat, but she was basically helpless. The link frayed, and the mental blitzkrieg faltered.

Rudra kept nipping at the cat's haunch, trying to distract it. But it didn't turn around. Instead, one of its huge hind paws kicked at Rudra, claws extended. It struck like a pile-driver, knocking him backwards, leaving four deep gouges in his chest.

Refusing to stop and feel the pain, Rudra caught his balance, and charged at the cat again. And, at the same moment, Morgan dropped out of the mind-link, so he could make a Pattern-transit. He blipped in, right on top of the cat: one-hundred-seventy-four pounds of enraged white wolf, right between the cat's shoulders. His teeth ground into its neck, and his claws raked its shoulders, ripping fur and flesh.

The cat yowled, let go of Q'uiesrim, and started to roll over. It was trying to crush Morgan. Rudra howled, and leaped.

But suddenly, everything stopped. The cat stopped in mid-roll, frozen. Q'uiesrim stopped, too. Morgan leaped away from the cat, still snarling.

Rudra ran right into the back of the cat. It was like hitting a wall. The cat was totally frozen.

'Dad, what did you do?' Rudra demanded.

'I slowed down its relative time with the Pattern,' Morgan explained. 'I've done it to Q'uiesrim, too... we have to stop her from bleeding. Now, you take human form, and go get me the following items...' He reeled off some herbs and leaves, and other natural items that were common near the lake at that season, which were useful in first aid.

Rudra hurried to obey. Q'uiesrim and the cat were like statues.

"Dad, what is that thing?" Rudra asked over his shoulder, as he trotted off.

'I don't know,' Morgan answered soberly. 'But we'll gather the Pack, and then we'll find out from its mind.'

There was no sign that Morgan felt sorry for the cat. If anything, he was looking forward to trashing its mind. Well, it didn't seem like a bad idea to Rudra, at that point, either.

Morwena and Alphaz came running into the Pack Ground's central clearing. Morwena was panting heavily. But, clear and strong on a mental level, she was calling out: 'Dad! Dad! Mom!'

T'Pring, Morwena's mother, came running up. 'What's wrong, Morwena?'

Morwena ran to her mother, hungry for reassurance. 'Something's killing animals, down south, and you can't touch its mind!'

Now, other Pack members were arriving: Justrine, Critcher, Taggle, Tigriz, Thufir, and Morgnut. They all wanted to know what the problem was. While Morwena was explaining, more wolves came into camp: Leggamore, Falway, Siggan, and Stormbringer. They, too, had a strange story to tell.

In accordance with Pack custom, the whole group formed a mind-link, and the disturbing events were shared by all. What it amounted to, was two very different encounters at about the same time, two days previous. Strange powers had been involved: the power to cloak a mind, the power to kill instantly, and some very convincing shape-changing. In both cases, the strangers had shown ill intent, either toward Quiquearn or animals.

'Amberites may be involved,' Morwena suggested. 'They have strange powers, and Dad says they seldom hesitate to kill.'

'Okay, where's Abu, where's Q'uiesrim, and where's Rudra?' asked Leggamore. The tone of his thought made it clear he was changing the subject, not to be rude, but because in Morgan's absence he was the Pack Leader. So he felt a great responsibility for the missing Pack members, and that took priority.

"Abu" was Morgan's most common name in the Pack. No one had seen Morgan, Q'uiesrim, or Rudra for several hours.

'Have they been attacked, too?' Storm wondered.

'I don't know,' answered Leggamore. 'Let's start looking for them.'

'Maybe we should howl for them,' suggested Morwena.

'Where were they headed?' asked Storm.

Nobody knew where they'd gone. The Pack tried howling for

them, but there was no answer. There was no response to a psychic call, either. So, at Leggamore's direction, the Pack members started scattering in a search pattern, staying close enough together that they formed a psychic network, each wolf close enough to contact its neighbors and pass messages.

Presently, the network expanded to touch the shore of the Great Lake, a few miles to the north. There, they found Morgan and Rudra, giving first aid to the wounded Q'uiesrim. Morgan, in wolf form, was directing, and Rudra, in human form, was following those directions.

The finding of the lost ones was relayed to all the Pack members, and they all came running. They gathered around Morgan at the lakeshore, and he shared his experience of the fight, and the capture of the strange cat-thing. The cat was still frozen, like a big, black-furred statue. Everybody sniffed it, but it just stood there. Since it was time-frozen, it wasn't thinking, and they couldn't feel its mind.

When all the stories had been shared, Morgan told the Pack, 'We're going to psychically dismember this creature, and see what it is.'

'How did you freeze it?' Storm asked curiously.

'Never mind that, let's see what it is,' Morgan answered shortly.

'Have you ever seen anything like the way that stranger shielded his mind?' Storm pursued, unabashed. People often ignored Storm, or snapped at him, so he'd learned not to let it bother him. Such is the joy of being the runt of the litter.

'That wolf brought the Pattern up to his mind, and used it to block his psyche,' Morgan answered soberly. 'I can recognize it from your memories. Now, everybody, concentrate on the mind-link. T'Pring, I'm going to unfreeze the cat, and you use everybody's psychic power to just grab its mind and hold it.'

This was done. With the full power of the Pack behind her, T'Pring easily caught the creature's mind, and peeled away its mental defenses. Once it was helpless, she quickly went through its memories.

The cat had a mistress, called Tami'nell. The cat's clearest image of her showed a human female, with dark hair, wearing a dress of some kind and boots, with a whip in her hand. Ever since it was a kitten, it had belonged to her. It also remembered others of its own kind, and its kind collectively were called nor'cats.

'Probe for other humans in its memory,' Morgan directed.

The cat had strong, intermittent memories of a male human named Vasca, who was capable of turning himself into a nor'cat. When he was human, he was big and husky-looking, bearded, with a high forehead. Human or nor'cat, he had a strong, recognizable

scent.

'Human, or Amberite?' wondered Siggan.

'It doesn't matter, they're one and the same,' Morgan declared.

'No,' Siggan disagreed.

'Well, the cat can't tell the difference,' T'Pring put in. 'It just registers two-legged things with clothes on.'

The nor'cat also had images of other humans. There was a man named Pharcis, who had a very dog-like scent. He didn't look completely human: he had a bit of a muzzle, and a fuzzy chin and mustache, and his ears were a little on the pointy side. Pharcis was always looking at cards–playing cards–and sometimes there were rainbows around him.

'Trumps!' exclaimed Morwena, recognizing the cards Amberites and Lords of Chaos used to communicate. They'd all seen Trumps in Morgan's memories. 'Dad, do you recognize him?'

'I don't know any of these people,' Morgan replied.

The nor'cat had memories of Tami'nell, Vasca, and Pharcis being around since it was a kitten. More recently, it had memories of another human, a male human called Zi'hr. He had dark hair, carried a big sword, and sometimes wore armor.

There were also things called glaukan. They were dog-like, or canine-like, and had something to do with Pharcis. They had pronounced eyeteeth, and walked on their hind legs. They walked on their hind legs. They often rode horses. They carried weapons. But, like Pharcis, they had a bit of a muzzle. Their ears were floppy.

'What about the weapons?' Morgan asked. 'Probe for them.'

The cat's images of the weapons were not clear. There were devices the glaukan carred in their hands, and they shot things with them. It was impossible to tell, from the cat's mind, whether these were rifles, energy weapons, or simple crossbows.

Morgan's lip curled. 'Tame dogs. Ha!'

All the Pack members reacted with contempt for the glaukan, and the nor'cats. The Quiquearn were fiercely independent and proud of their freedom. They scorned any creature that would allow itself to be owned by another.

T'Pring was very interested in the nor'cat's mind-shield. She probed, and found it was just a mental trick. Simple, really... in effect, the cat disappeared by pretending it wasn't there. This trick had apparently been taught to all the nor'cats by Tami'nell. T'Pring quickly taught the trick to all the Pack members, through their shared rapport.

'The only problem is, it won't work while we're all linked,' Rudra observed. 'It's an individual thing.'

'True,' T'Pring agreed. 'We can't do it, and remain linked. But, if we suspect there's a creature in the area, we can scan for someone

who's using this trick. And if we find anybody, we can break through the barrier.'

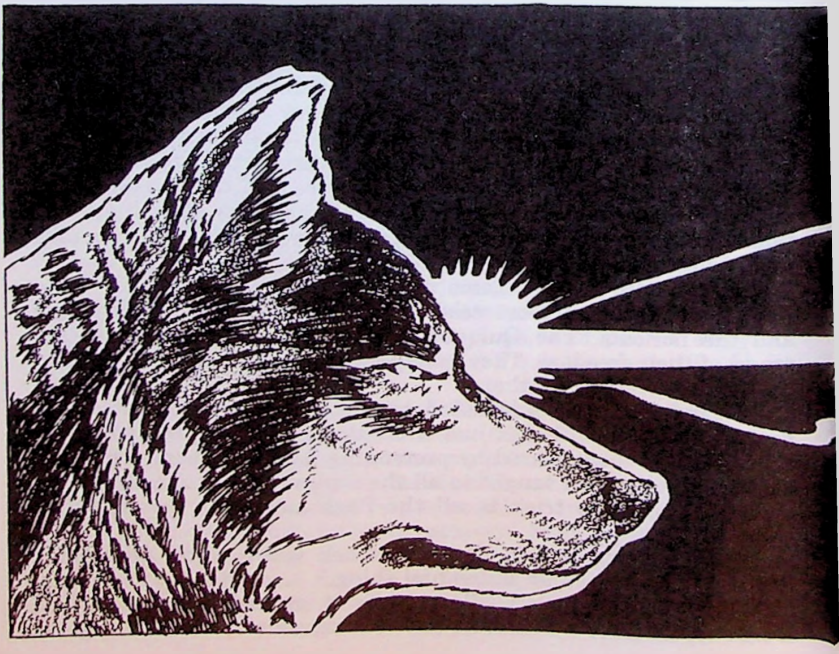
'Unless, of course, the person's real, real good at psi,' Storm amended gloomily.

'Actually, no,' T'Pring disagreed. 'I don't think they could bar themselves from us, while we're joined together as we are now.'

'This is a mind shield that doesn't require Pattern,' Siggan mused. 'So, it's not the thing the false Leggamore used.'

'That's true,' Morgan agreed. 'That was something different.'

Meanwhile, unknown to the Pack, Niemand was watching them from afar. Working delicately, he managed to catch and amplify stray emanations, and share what the Pack was learning. He smiled to himself, noting with approval that the Quiquearn seemed equal to the threat of the nor'cats. But then he sobered, wondering about Tami'nell and her friends. What kind of power had invaded this peaceful Shadow? Could the Quiquearn handle it?



Niemand was concerned. He felt responsible for the Quiquearn. He decided to continue his monitoring, and help them if they needed it.

And what about the strange wolf with Pattern? As a Lord of Chaos, it was hard for Niemand to think of Pattern as something that would be good for the Pack. But he didn't know enough to make a clear decision. Yes, better to continue watching, for now.

Unaware of Niemand's surveillance, the Pack was still checking out the nor'cat.

'Can we get any idea of how it got here?' asked Rudra. 'And, is it linked with the other attacks that are being made on us?

T'Pring searched its mind, and found it had been following Tami'nell, through a variety of lands that shifted in a strange manner. Tami'nell had apparently been hellriding, moving through Shadow, along with Vasca, Pharcis, Zi'hr, and a number of nor'cats and glaukan. Hellriding was something Amberites did... and also Lords of Chaos.

It seemed these people used Pattern, not Logrus, so how could they be from Chaos? And, if they were Amberites, why didn't Morgan recognize any of them?

In any case, the nor'cat had followed Tami'nell through Shadow. The party had travelled to the Shadow where the Quiquearn lived, and started to explore. T'Pring found images of the desert, a pass through the mountains, and a sheltered valley to the south that Morgan recognized all too well. And then the nor'cat had been sent to the Great Lake, to explore. One minute, it had been in the valley. Then, something had been done to it -- something it didn't understand -- and it had appeared by the lake.

'Dad, can you tell what the transition was?' Rudra asked.

'No,' Morgan answered. 'I can only go by what the cat knew. It had no comprehension of what was happening, and there's nothing anyone did in its presence that I can recognize. I know of several ways it could have been done.'

T'Pring was thoughtful. 'All it knows, is the instructions that seem to've been planted in its mind. It was told to look around, and to find interesting things. And, it was told it would be retrieved.'

'It wasn't necessarily instructed to kill anything?' Rudra asked.

'No,' T'Pring answered. 'But its nature is to kill things. To send this thing out on a search mission is like saying, "Kill whatever you feel like killing."'

'Did this thing kill the wild boars?' asked Morwena.

Startled, T'Pring probed. 'No,' she reported after a moment. 'For one thing, it's a natural creature. It couldn't just snuff something out like that. It would have to chew it up, claw it.'

'So it doesn't have some power that would allow it to do that?' Morwena pursued.

'No, there's nothing like that in its mind.'

'Are we finished?' Morgan asked. He seemed to've lost interest in the nor'cat.

T'Pring hesitated. 'I could spend a couple of hours going through its mind in detail, if you want.'

'Yeah!' cheered Siggan, who was enjoying herself. 'It would be interesting.'

'Is there more that would be interesting to us?' Morgan asked skeptically.

T'Pring gave a mental frown. 'Well, whatever this thing is, it's an enemy, right?'

'Yeah,' Morgan answered. 'So we kill it.'

'Yes, but not before we search all of its memory,' T'Pring suggested.

'*Yes*,' chimed in Siggan. 'Know your enemy first.'

'Okay,' Morgan agreed.

'And we'll study the structure of its mind, how it works?' Siggan asked eagerly.

'Absolutely,' T'Pring agreed, pleased to see her daughter's interest in the arts of the mind.

Morwena had as much interest in the psychic arts as anyone. But the whole process was making her queasy. 'It might be a good idea to kill it right away.'

'Why?' Siggan demanded crossly. Morwena was threatening to take away her toy.

Morwena hesitated, trying to find a reason besides her disgust at the cat's utter helplessness. 'Well, otherwise its humans might find it and retrieve it, and find out that it's been here. Whereas, if it was dead, they might not be able to find it.'

'They left it here,' Rudra argued. 'If it's dead, then they would figure it died here.'

Storm spoke up. 'The question is, do we want to kill it now, or take whatever risk is involved in keeping it alive?'

'Mom, what do you think?' Siggan asked.

'I think we should totally search its mind,' T'Pring replied.

'We could just freeze it,' suggested Rudra.

'Then, when it was retrieved, it would just go back,' Morgan disagreed. 'And whoever it belongs to–this pet, this *slave*–' He paused, while the Pack reacted with snarls of rage and disgust. '–When it's retrieved, if it's still alive, it can be released from what I've done to it.'

'So what?' asked Rudra. 'She's probably got zillions of them.'

'So, if they rescue it, then they'll find out everything it knows about us,' Morwena reminded him.

'Which is, that we kicked its ass,' Rudra pointed out.

Morwena was not reassured. 'Yeah. Which means they'll get all their heavy shit, and come looking for us.'

'They're gonna come looking for us anyway,' Rudra argued.

'They may very well,' Siggan agreed. 'They know where they left it.'

Morwena looked thoughtful. 'Why don't you take it someplace else, Dad, and leave it somewhere, making it look like something else killed it?

But no one paid any attention to this idea. Everybody was trying to bring up a different subject, all at once.

'They're in a valley south of here, right?' Storm asked Morgan.

'That's right,' Morgan confirmed.

'How'd Siggan and Storm and company take on these folks?' asked Rudra.

'We beat off the fake Leggamore,' answered Storm.

'Did it shift in front of you?' Rudra enquired.

'Oh, yeah,' Storm remembered. 'It disappeared. So, we've still got that to worry about.'

'They're probably already around here,' Morwena suggested gloomily.

Rudra's looked around uneasily. 'Could be.'

Storm looked at Morgan. 'So, Pop, what do you think we should do about all this?'

'Dad, can you get it to the place it was sent from?' Rudra chimed in.

'It doesn't have any idea how it got here,' Morgan answered Rudra.

'Yeah, but it saw its surroundings,' Rudra argued. 'Can't you get any idea of where it was?'

'Possibly,' Morgan agreed thoughtfully. 'I was at the valley a little while ago, and there was something strange there, but I didn't know what. That's why I came back, to make sure you people were all right. But, what I sensed was probably the people who brought the cat. The cat itself wasn't in the valley today... it was sent to the lake a couple days ago.'

Siggan spoke up. 'Hey, Mom, can we go into its mind and erase whatever it knows about us? And then we could let it go alive, and it wouldn't know anything to tell.

'We are going to kill it,' Morgan announced with finality.

'Oh, yeah, it attacked us,' Storm agreed.

'Daddy, you always want to kill things!' Siggan complained. She seemed to have gone from bloodthirsty to compassionate in a heartbeat, a thing she often did. But then, she was hardly the first thirteen-year-old to do so.

Storm frowned at Siggan. 'Look at Q'uiesrim!' he suggested.

'Daddy is right,' put in Morwena.

'Why?' Siggan demanded.

'We're not gonna let this thing go,' Storm insisted.

'Because it's... it's *nasty*,' Morwena answered.

'So are we, and that's no reason to kill us!' Siggan objected.

T'Pring was staring at the nor'cat, eyes narrowed. 'We could erase everything that it knows about us, and then put something extra in there. That's certainly possible. Especially if you tag it somehow, Morgan.'

Siggan gave a mental cheer. 'Yeah, Mom, yeah!

'You're the bestest, most smartest Mom in the whole world!' Rudra crowed.

'Yeah! You're fine, Mom!' agreed Siggan.

Morgan looked thoughtfully at his mate. 'You mean tag it with a mental jarring, a word...'

'*You* can tag it, with your Pattern tag, so that we could either go

to it or snatch it back,' T'Pring reminded him.

'Yeah, yeah!' Rudra agreed enthusiastically.

Morgan considered. 'I'd most likely make it a double tag. The tag to follow or snatch it back is nice, I like that. I'd also like to have it turn on its owner.'

'No, you wouldn't,' Rudra argued. 'You want it to be sitting there listening to whatever they say.'

Morgan looked at the cat with a wicked grin. 'No, no. If there is a moment in which we are in danger, and we need a distraction...'

'Oh, well, I can do that easily,' offered T'Pring.

'Okay, we'll add that, and I'll tag it,' Morgan decided.

Together, Morgan and T'Pring worked on the cat's mind. They programmed it not to remember anything about the Quiquearn. But, if any Quiquearn ordered it to, it would turn on its owner or any of her friends.

All the children watched avidly. Morwena still looked queasy; but when was horror a bar to fascination? If anything, she watched more intently than the others.

'Can... can we fix it so we can tap its memories from a distance, and find out what's going on?' she asked timidly. 'Can we make it easier to get back in contact with it, from a distance greater than we could normally reach?'

'No,' T'Pring answered regretfully. 'If it goes more than a mile from us, the ranges involved will simply be too great.'

'Can we tag along with you, Mom, while you do that, so we'll see how it's done?' Siggan asked.

'Absolutely,' T'Pring answered warmly. 'Good children, good puppies. Watch this...'

Morgan was grinning like a pirate. 'So you take the medulla oblongata, and you toss it with some croutons, kids... watch closely.'

'Ha, Morwena, what do you think of that!' Siggan exulted.

'Oooh, grody!' Morwena exclaimed.

Storm looked back and forth from Morwena to Siggan. 'I wouldn't do that to anything really *intelligent*, but...'

'I don't know,' Siggan answered dreamily. 'I'm kind of enjoying this glimpse, through Mom, of what I'll be like when I'm a grownup.'

Rudra was fascinated by the whole process. 'Huh, so that's a brain, hmmm? How do I squeeze in there?'

Niemand was very interested in the tagging. From their interactions, it seemed the wolf with Pattern–the one called "Abu"–was mated to T'Pring, and the youngsters were their puppies. And the young ones didn't have Pattern, but they definitely had the Blood.

Vagrant could also see what Niemand saw. "That creature, that cat, is not of this Shadow," he commented.

"Of course not," Niemand answered.

"You don't understand," Vagrant pursued. "It's not of this Shadow, at all."

That got Niemand's attention. "You mean, of this Pattern and Logrus?"

"I mean, all this Shadow out here, this place, the place we came from, they're all Shadows of Chaos."

"And this cat is a Shadow of Pattern?"

"It's not. At least, not a Pattern I am familiar with."

"So, it's from one of the other Patterns that spread out from Chaos?"

"Maybe not even that. Look, this T'Pring and these other wolves have been here for years."

"Yeah. Well, T'Pring we know."

"Yes. These have all been here for years. And the path that we followed is only a couple of weeks old."

Niemand was dubious. "Yeah, but time is kind of a malleable thing."

"But still... they've been here for years."

Niemand changed focus, scanning the cat carefully, layer by layer.

"Interesting," he remarked. "It's a Pattern construct, not a natural creature. Somebody built these nor'cats." He frowned. He couldn't tell what what version of the Pattern had been used. It didn't seem to be the Pattern the strange wolf had. *He* was no construct. He was very real. Niemand was pretty sure he was an Amberite, shifted to wolf form with magic. It felt like magic, rather than some innate shape-shifting ability. It was hard to be sure, though.

The Pack seemed to call him "Abu" or "Morgan"... except for the kids, who just called him Dad. Wasn't there a Lord of Amber named Morgan? Yes, Niemand had heard of him... there'd been a story in the Courts... Morgan had stopped a duel, once, by pulling out an energy rifle and blasting one of the contestants. Who had it been? Not a friend of Niemand's... Griz? Goriz? Something like that? The Courts had buzzed with outrage at Morgan's behavior, but Niemand had thought the story was pretty funny.

Hmmm... might it be possible for Niemand to find other tracks of Pattern in this Shadow?

Morgan and T'Pring had finished operating on the nor'cat's mind.

'Now, I'll afix a small version of the Pattern to it, and that will be

the tag,' Morgan remarked. 'Hmmm... I wonder, can I simply alter its neural paths to resemble a portion of the Pattern, to act as a beacon? No, that would be too noticeable, especially if they use Pattern to recover it. I mean, if *I* were pulling something back with Pattern, and there was a new neurological Pattern, I'd notice.'

He decided to just impose the Pattern on one of the cat's rear claws. Once he'd decided, the operation was quick and simple. Just a tiny Pattern, very inconspicuous, on one claw. But he'd be able to find it easily enough, since he knew exactly what to look for.

Morgan stood back, looking at the cat. It stood passively, its mind blank. T'Pring was still holding it, so no thoughts could flow and no memories of the Quiquearn could form.

'Now, what I think would be a good idea would be for me to freeze him, take him back to the lake area, and dump him,' Morgan remarked.

T'Pring's eyes narrowed. 'When you say dump him, you mean in the lake, or what?'

Morgan smiled. 'You know, these things happen.'

'You want me to make sure that it has a particular memory about this?' she suggested. 'Like slipping and falling in the lake?'

Morgan smiled even wider. 'Yeah.'

T'Pring chuckled. 'Okay.'

She did this. A moment later, there was a tiny pop of imploding air, as Morgan made the nor'cat vanish.

Rudra spoke up. 'Are there a lot more of these cat things?'

'Yeah, it specifically remembers seventeen others,' T'Pring answered.

Morgan remarked, 'What I think might be a good idea, would be for the Pack to begin moving west, towards the plains of the bison, to tie up with the other Pack that went that way.'

'Do we know where the rest of the nor'cats went?' asked Storm.

T'Pring sent him a mental image of Tami'nell, Pharcis, Vasca, Zi'hr, and a lot of glaukan on horseback, going into the valley to the south, with all eighteen of the nor'cats. The humans had seemed drawn to the valley, for some reason not clear to the cat. Tani'nell and Vasca and Pharcis had spent a lot of time talking about which way they were going to go, and which path to take at various points. And they'd deliberately headed to the valley. Something had drawn them there, like a beacon.

'Yeah,' Morgan mutter, low in his mind. 'They were headed right for it.'

'For what?' asked Storm.

They all looked at Morgan curiously.

'For you?' Rudra asked his father.

Morgan hesistated. 'Well... the valley, which no one uses much,

I use as a place to examine what is happening elsewhere in the world.'

'What do you mean, what is happening elsewhere in the world?' Siggan demanded.

'Don't get snooty with me, child,' Morgan answered loftily. 'Utilizing the Pattern. What's happening in Amber, what's happening in Chaos, what's happening back where we came from, all those different places, just to keep track. Because time...' He trailed off.

Rudra snorted. 'And it was like you were leaving a big sign with an X, saying, "We are here."'

Siggan growled, 'Yeah, you attracted all these things to us.'

'Not necessarily,' Morgan protested.

'Yeah,' Siggan insisted.

'They would've come through anyway,' Morgan argued.

Morwena started jumping up and down, pantomiming a serious attempt to attract attention. 'Here we are! Here we are!'

Rudra frowned thoughtfully. 'Dad, have you been back there recently, to see whether they have found these devices, or whatever it is that you use to accomplish this?'

Morgan smiled. 'No, I used *me*. It was only me.

'Why would they be looking for you?' asked Morwena.

'These faces and creatures do not correspond with anything I remember,' Morgan answered pensively.

'These aren't our relatives?' Rudra asked.

'I don't know any of them,' Morgan insisted. 'They don't correspond with any images we have. And the Pattern... I believe the Pattern the creature has is not the same as the Pattern that I have.'

'And what about the Leggamore look-alike?' Storm asked.

'I'm not sure,' Morgan hedged. 'As to why they are here, it's a matter of whether they are simply looking for me, or in typical, human, scummy fashion they simply want to kill and butcher animals.'

'Let's kill them,' Morwena suggested with sudden vehemence.

'Yeah,' chimed in Siggan. 'We want them dead. They keep these nor'cats as *pets*. I don't like them.'

'These nor'cats aren't all that tough,' Storm mused.

'They aren't that tough?' Rudra echoed incredulously. After all, he'd fought one. And, if they weren't tough, he didn't want to meet anything that was.

'They are tough physically,' Storm amended. 'But mentally, they don't seem all that tough. But we don't know, this might be the weakest of them. That's one thing we should check out. But these nor'cats aren't really intelligent, so that psychically all of them may

just be like Rudra here. So, we can take these guys out.'

Morgan frowned. 'I think, first, what we need to do is increase our own strengths and numbers. Which means linking up with the other Pack.'

'Okay, can you find them for us?' asked Morwena.

'Yeah,' Morgan agreed absently. 'So, these are at least not Chaos-creatures. But they're not from the Amber we know. It's not Deirdre, it's not Damien, it's not Thanos, it's not Solem.'

Siggan sang in her mind, using a tune she'd picked up from Morgan, 'Oh, Solem mio!'

Morwena lay down, put her head on the ground, and clapped her paws over her ears. It was purely a social comment; psychic singing is not so easily blocked.

Siggan grinned at Morwena, taking a little bow.

Morgan just snickered, and went on, 'They have a different Pattern from Amber, or Bright, or Brand's world, or Reaper's world, or Ust's, or the Land of the Dead's Pattern... and those are all the Patterns I know, but there could be others. I'd say this Pattern is about as strange as Reaper's... which makes it pretty strange, compared to the Pattern of Amber.'

Storm put in, 'Can we check around, to see if any of these creatures might be moving around? I mean, they can hide, but we can track them now, right?'

'Sure,' answered T'Pring. 'You mean, aside from the one we caught, which is now down by the lakeshore? That one's not a problem. We know how to stay out of its sight, we know how to track it. We can let it wander around here. It's not going to bother any of us, if we stay away from it.'

'But, could there be any more around now, hiding in this same way?' Storm pursued.

'Sure. Possibly,' T'Pring admitted. So she used the Pack's mind-link to check the area. But she found nothing. The area was apparently clear.

'So, this thing was here for a couple of days, right?' asked Rudra.

'Yes,' T'Pring agreed. 'It was here for a couple of days. It killed a deer and ate it. And it was getting hungry at the time when it spotted you.'

'Oh, it was?' That idea didn't exactly charm Rudra.

'Yes, it attacked you out of hunger,' T'Pring explained. 'It could have caught fish, or little things, but it doesn't like to.'

Rudra gave a strained smile. 'I look juicy.'

'Plump,' added Morgan.

'See, that's what you get for being chunky,' put in Storm.

Rudra, who was rather sensitive about his case of adolescent pudge, changed the subject. 'Okay. Let's go link up with the other

I use as a place to examine what is happening elsewhere in the world.'

'What do you mean, what is happening elsewhere in the world?' Siggan demanded.

'Don't get snooty with me, child,' Morgan answered loftily. 'Utilizing the Pattern. What's happening in Amber, what's happening in Chaos, what's happening back where we came from, all those different places, just to keep track. Because time...' He trailed off.

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wolves. I think we should go for this thing.'

'Yeah, I agree,' answered Morgan, in suddenly businesslike tones. He brought the Pattern up, trying to identify where the other wolves were. But he couldn't find them.

'Would you find them if they're dead?' Rudra asked.

'Maybe not.' Morgan was worried. 'There's no trace of them, and no trace of their being active for a period of time. No kills, no dens, or anything like that.'

'Dad, did you check everywhere from where we are to the ocean?' asked Rudra.

Morgan nodded. 'I covered the whole world. If they swam over to another continent, I'd have found them. Either they have been totally destroyed, so there are no bodies left, or they've been removed from this environment. Hmmm. Let me scan some of the neighboring Shadows...'

There was a rather tense moment of silence. Morgan probed... and hit a solid wall.

'This Shadow has been barred!' he announced.

'Our Shadow is barred?' Morwena repeated, aghast. 'Did you do that, Dad?'

'No.'

'Somebody's locked us in here?' Morwena pursued.

'Yes.'

There was a silence. This did not strike anyone as a happy thought.

Assuming a hearty tone, Rudra spoke up: 'You can get us out, right, Dad?'

'I don't know,' Morgan admitted glumly.

'Huhh?' was all Rudra could reply.

'I don't know,' Morgan repeated. 'I don't know how effective...'

'Why would they do that?' Siggan demanded.

Rudra looked grim. 'Well, you know how, when you herd something, you try and box it in somewhere, and then you come in, and... that's the thought that's come to my mind, call me a pessimist, I don't know.'

'Yes,' Morgan added softly.

Morwena's eyes were hard. 'Maybe they want to catch us, and make us into pets like the nor'cats.'

'Ohh, yuck. Gross!' exclaimed Rudra.

'Hey, I just thought of something,' Storm put in. 'Dad, you couldn't find the rest of the Pack members anywhere?'

'No,' Morgan agreed.

'And this Leggamore creature–or he looked like Leggamore–said he came from the other Pack. So he must have known them.'

'He killed them!' Rudra burst out.

'He could have done dozens of things to them,' Morwena corrected. 'Maybe they took them away.'

'This is a danger to the Pack,' Storm declared solemnly.

No one felt inclined to argue.

'Are we still leaving?' Rudra asked.

Morgan was staring straight ahead of him. 'I don't know if we're gonna move or not,' he admitted after a moment.

'Oh, what's the point?' asked Morwena impatiently. 'There's no point in trying to be secretive now.'

'No, I know, but I wanna figure out where we're gonna go,' answered Morgan.

'Well, then, can we kill that nor'cat?' Morwena asked.

'No,' Morgan answered.

'It's been programmed,' Storm pointed out.

Morgan nodded. 'It may come in useful. So we've dumped it, and we'll leave.'

Morwena frowned. 'Dad, if you go to the area where the other wolves were living, can you find whether they're, you know, dead there somewhere?'

Morgan shook his head. 'They're gone.'

'They're just gone?' Morwena asked.

'Gone,' Morgan repeated. 'I can't find them. It's like they were *never here*. There are no remnants of them having hunted or killed, or done anything. They are *gone*.'

Morwena didn't answer. But the fur along her back stood up. And she wasn't the only one, either.

'But this Leggamore-creature knew about them,' Storm pointed out. 'So it must have met up with them.'

'They took them away...' Morwena speculated.

Rudra looked worried. 'Dad, you'd know if we'd accidentally shifted Shadow somehow?'

'We have not shifted. We are here,' answered Morgan positively.

'This is where we were born and raised, and grew up...?' Rudra pursued.

'Yes.' Morgan was certain.

'Can you find these people? In the valley?' Storm asked.

Meanwhile, Niemand had been pursuing that very line of inquiry. And he'd found a whole group of Pattern-traces. He took some time to trace each one, and identify each one separately.

The first one he found was a dog-like man, apparently Pharcis. He was working on a little tablet, sketching a Trump of the young Quiquearn called Siggan. But, when Niemand started to observe, Pharcis suddenly stopped in mid-line and looked up. Then, with his

free hand, Pharcis drew a circle, and started to draw in the features of Niemand's current shape.

Niemand instinctively cut the contact, strongly impressed by Pharcis's sensitivity and ability to cut through Niemand's protective measures. Now the question was, could Pharcis finish a Trump of Niemand, just from that one glimpse? Niemand wasn't sure he could protect himself. His own fix on Pharcis, based on that one glimpse, might be shaky for purposes of offense, or defense against a strong attack.

Niemand turned to Vagrant. "It looks like we've been spotted. Or at least, I have."

Vagrant sighed. "Let us relocate."

"Outside the barrier? Or --"

"No. I think it best to remain. We do have a charge, after all." With a sweeping gesture, Vagrant activated the Logrus. Suddenly, he and Niemand were in a barren, icy landscape, with snow blowing across low, crusted drifts. In human form, they would have needed shelter at once, but as usual their Chaos forms protected them.

Niemand considered some protective measures, to make his probes radiate less strongly. But the problem was, Pharcis hadn't seemed to be tracing the magical emanations. It was more like he was reacting to the slight psychic contact involved in the surveillance. Hmmm... it might be better to concentrate on the other trails of power in the Shadow. But, all of those were in the same area as Pharcis, except for some of the nor'cats who were scouting. And the nor'cats didn't seem like especially significant targets.

Niemand sat back to think. His protective measures should inform him of any enemy probes, and he needed the time. He'd gotten slight impressions of Pharcis's companions. And there was something familiar about the man called Zi'hr.

Had Niemand seen Zi'hr before? He searched his memory. No, he'd never met Zi'hr... not in Zi'hr's current form. But the nagging impression remained. Perhaps Zi'hr was a shape-shifted version of somebody Niemand knew? But then, who was he? Someone from Chaos? From Amber? It was impossible to be sure.

No impression of either Pattern or Logrus from Zi'hr... or from Pharcis, for that matter. But then, from such a brief glimpse, that wasn't conclusive.

Niemand looked over his protections, found them in good shape. But something more seemed indicated. Perhaps a device to protect the holder from Trump contact... Yes, that would be good, and relatively quick, too. Niemand began to work on such a device, tailoring it to Siggan and using her true name, as Niemand perceived it.

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When he finished the device, he held it in one hand and regarded it. Yes, that should be fine. Now to make some others... one for each of the Quiquearn.

Elsewhere, the Pack was making its own preparations.

'We should head for the valley, where our enemies are located,' Morgan told the others.

'What about Q'uiesrim?' asked T'Pring.

'Q'uesrim is coming along with us,' Morgan decided.

'I'll slow you down,' Q'uiesrim put in grimly. 'I'm still weak, and my right front leg isn't working.'

Rudra asked, 'Dad, can't you put her somewhere, leave her with someone else?'

'That's a possibility,' Morgan admitted. 'But I don't think we should split up.'

'Well, Dad, why should we waste time walking to the valley?' asked Morwena. 'You can just sort of pfft! us there. If we don't have to run, Q'uiesrim can come with us.'

'Good,' Morgan agreed. 'It might be a little more noticeable. But it won't leave them as much time to react to our approach.'

'Can you detect where these other nor'cats are, first?' asked Rudra.

Morgan nodded. 'Sure. I'm just not sure they're worth the trouble. Hmm...' He made another scan with the Pattern, carefully avoiding the valley. 'Yeah, I can pinpoint them. They're scattered all over this continent, presumably scouting like the one we caught. Hmm... before we do anything, why don't we just take these cats out?'

The Pack members all agreed to that.

'Okay,' Morgan decided. 'What we'll do is, we'll just pop around, freeze them, and just rip them to shreds.'

'Why?' asked T'Pring.

Rudra answered, 'Because Tami'nell can apparently retrieve them at will. And we don't want her retrieving a pack of seventeen of them while we're in the middle of a fight.'

'Yes, that makes sense,' T'Pring acknowledged. And the other Pack members registered their agreement.

Morgan reached out with the Pattern, and focussed on one of the nor'cats. Then, with a quick effort of will, he transported the entire Pack to that spot. They appeared in the desert, far southwest of the Pack Ground. In front of them was one very astonished cat.

It snarled, raising a paw in threat. But Morgan time-froze it in mid-snarl. Grinning with obvious pleasure, Morgan eyed the helpless statue-cat. 'I like this. Oh, I like this.'

'Are we, like, gonna take turns?' asked Rudra.

Morgan turned to Q'uiesrim. 'I think you deserve the first chance to take one out.'

But Q'uiesrim hung back. The helpless cat did not activate her agressive responses.

Morgan sighed and shrugged. Then, he simply walked up to the cat and tore its throat out with his teeth. Since he was still in wolf form, this was after all the most efficient way to kill it.

'Now, the next one,' he commented. Once more, he concentrated on the Pattern.

Again, the whole Pack shifted. This time, they appeared in the woods near the rapids, where the river emptied into the western end of the Great Lake. Again, they faced a single nor'cat. Again, the cat was immediately frozen by Morgan.

'Who wants to do this one?' Morgan asked cheerfully.

Morwena stepped forward doubtfully. 'I guess I will.' Her eagerness quotient was somewhere below zero. But, since she agreed that it needed to be done, she figured she'd better help. So, she walked up to the cat, and killed it.

The Pack in general was pretty freaked out by the killings. Storm gave voice to their reluctance. 'The thing's helpless... things are supposed to run, or fight...'

'Well, we ain't got time for running and fighting,' put in Rudra briskly. 'I'll take out the next one.'

And he did. Volunteers were found for all the other cats, too, as Morgan found them one by one. But it never became a project that generated a lot of enthusiasm... except in Morgan.

When the Pack had found, and killed, eleven nor'cats, Morgan announced, 'That's it. The others must be in the valley. Well, that brings the odds down.'

Morwena asked, 'Are we going to find the one we let go, before, and kill it too?'

Morgan considered, obviously tempted. 'No, I want to let that one live. Well, it's getting dark now. I think we should rest, and tackle the valley in the morning. What we're going to have to do, I think, is set up sort of a guard over the psychic contact. You know, four or five Pack members, that sort of thing. We'll split it into four groups, each with one of the stronger psychic members in the group at any time.'

So they mounted guard, and that night they rested.

The night passed uneventfully. In the morning, Morgan gathered the Pack, and they re-formed their mind-link. Then he raised the Pattern again, and scanned for any signs of hostile activity, but found nothing. His scan skirted the edges of the valley. There were

strong power radiations from that area, but no sign that the Pack was being observed.

'Let's go,' Rudra projected grimly.

'Okay,' Morgan agreed. 'Everybody be ready, and I'm going to start scanning the valley.'

Immediately, he got the impression of damage. There were horses' hoofprints. There was game that had been wantonly killed: some of the animals hadn't even been skinned. Mostly, these were small, furry animals... a couple of rabbits, a few mink, some martens, and an otter.

'These are disgusting humans!' Siggan burst out, when she saw the dead animals through the Pack's rapport with Morgan. 'They impersonate critters, they kill animals and don't eat them...'

'So where are they?' wondered Morwena.

'Let me keep scanning,' Morgan replied tersely.

Storm asked, 'Dad, do you want to move us closer, first, or are you gonna stay out here?'

'I'd rather stay out here for the moment,' Morgan replied.

'Hey, Dad, what happened to "our" nor'cat?' asked Rudra. 'We didn't see it this morning, did we?'

'No, we didn't,' Morgan agreed. 'Let's see...'

He looked for it, and, sure enough, his Pattern-sight focussed on an encampment in the valley. Campfires were burning. There were horses. Right next to the target cat was Tami'nell, wearing a long dress and carrying a whip, just like her picture in the nor'cat's mind. Behind her was a tall, bearded man... Vasca.

As Morgan's scan focussed, Vasca looked up. At once, Morgan cut off his scan.

'Now what?' asked Storm.

Morgan considered. 'I don't feel anything probing against the Pattern.'

'We've found our target,' Morwena pointed out. 'The woman named Tami'nell. Dad, can you bring her to us, so they won't be able to tell where she went?'

'They'll be able to find her, if they have anything like what we can do,' Storm pointed out.

'We already turned the cat loose,' Rudra mused.

'I think it's time for us to physically move,' put in Morgan. 'We'll head southward, down along the ridge of the mountains, in the direction of the valley.'

They moved out, at the slow pace Q'uiesrim could maintain. This turned out to be a good move. As soon as they were over the first hill, Morgan detected a heavy-duty concentration of Pattern-power appearing by the lakeshore, where they'd been.

'Okay, we're outa here,' Morgan commented. At once, he made a

Pattern transit, moving the whole Pack to a remote hillside, far to the south of the valley.

'What are you doing?' demanded Rudra.

'Running,' Morgan answered succinctly.

'Where you gonna run to?' Rudra pursued.

Morgan shrugged his wolf shoulders. 'Well, the whole idea is, they had a big Pattern activity up by the lake, which means they've returned to where that cat was. I don't know exactly what they returned with. If they've returned with the horses, and the guys on the horses with rifles and whatever, we need to be as far away from them as we can get, as quickly as possible.'

'Were there rifles?' Storm asked.

'We don't know yet,' replied Morgan. 'We haven't gotten a clear picture of the glaukan's weapons yet, so we're still going by the cat's mind, and it didn't know. There was no smell of gunpowder or ozone in its memories.'

'Could be just a simple crossbow,' Morwena speculated.

'Could be,' Morgan agreed. 'Could be a rifle, could be a crossbow, could be just about anything. Whatever it is, it kills at a distance.' He grinned. 'My favorite approach to killing.'

'Maybe we should try and get some of those killing-at-a-distance things,' Morwena suggested.

'That's a thought,' Morgan agreed. 'Let's pop down to their encampment.'

'Wait,' cautioned Rudra. 'Why don't you take a look around for some of these guys, and take them, and we can get their weapons?'

'Good,' Morgan agreed. He scanned for some of the glaukan. 'I'm getting a strong reading from the lakeshore. Here, let me get a picture. This time, I'll try not to be spotted.'

He concentrated, and an image jumped into focus in all their minds. The scene was, indeed, the lakeshore. The vision showed a couple of dozen horses, with people on them. One of the people was Vasca, and he immediately looked up, as if searching for Morgan's scan. Next to him, on either side, were Tami'nell and Pharcis. There were also a lot of glaukan.

But the Pack got only a glimpse of all this, because Morgan instantly cut off his scan to avoid being traced by Vasca.

'Whew!' he remarked. 'That guy definitely has Advanced Pattern. Hang on, I'm gonna scan their encampment, in the valley.'

He did this, and again a vision appeared. This time, they saw the encampment. There were a few glaukan, and a few nor'cats. And the man called Zi'hr was sitting by a campfire.

'Is one of those nor'cats the one that we had?' wondered Rudra.

'No,' Morgan answered. 'It could have been up north. I didn't specifically see any nor'cats... but then, I didn't take time to look. I

don't like that sword of Zi'hr's. It's pretty powerful, and I think the sword itself is sentient. We have a choice. We can pop in there, and try to take this guy out.'

'Yeah!' agreed Morwena. 'Or?'

Morgan shrugged. 'Or we could run.'

'Where can we run?' Morwena asked. 'The Shadow is barred.'

'Right,' Morgan admitted. 'What we can do is, I can pop us all in there. I can freeze the rest of them right away, if the rest of you psychically attack Zi'hr. And then, I can try to freeze him. T'Pring, you will lead the mental attack.'

The Pack registered agreement with a flurry of growls. They were keyed up, ready to go.

'Okay, now!' announced Morgan.

The Pack popped into the encampment. The glaukan all turned and stared at them. At once, the glaukan all spilled the bolts from their crossbows, onto the ground, at the same time grabbing at pouches strapped to their thighs. Meanwhile, the nor'cats in the camp snarled, and prepared to charge.

But Zi'hr simply stood up, casual as could be. He had his sword, sheathed, in one hand. But he made no move to draw it. In fact, he put it down, point-first on the ground, leaning it against his thigh. Then he held out both his hands, open and empty.

Morgan froze the nor'cats and the glaukan with the Pattern. The camp became weirdly still.

T'Pring, puzzled by Zi'hr's odd reaction, fired a hard probe at him... not a blasting attack, but a tight, questing probe. And it bounced, from a mental wall that seemed to come from his sword.

"I'm not with the other ones," Zi'hr announced calmly. "This was not my idea."

'Why are you hunting us?' Morgan asked.

Zi'hr's defense must have been very selective. It let Morgan's psychically-projected question through with no problem. This fitted Morgan's impression that the sword had intelligence: it could distinguish between an attack and a question.

"*I'm* not hunting you," Zi'hr answered.

'Why are *they* hunting us?' Morgan pursued.

Zi'hr shrugged. "Hey, it's not my fight."

'Why are you here?' Morgan asked him.

'Let's just take these other guys out,' Storm put in.

"I'm just along for the ride," Zi'hr explained. "I told 'em not to. I said it was a dumb idea."

'Can you help us stop this?' Morgan demanded.

'But why are they doing it?' Morwena demanded. 'Why are they doing this to us?'

Zi'hr looked at Morwena. 'They're hunters.'

"Yeah, but why us?" asked Rudra, speaking aloud because he was the only one in human form.

'We're prey, to them,' Morgan explained.

Zi'hr looked a little embarrassed. "You've got nice pelts?"

"Well, *thanks!*" said Rudra sarcastically.

Morwena growled. 'Let's kill him.'

"What do you mean, let's kill him?" asked Rudra.

Morwena was furious. 'Nice pelts!'

Storm spoke up. 'Dad, these guys you've frozen... should we knock them out? Because, if someone unfreezes them, I don't want to be fighting with them.'

"I should warn you guys, it's only a matter of time before they come back here," said Zi'hr.

'Can we knock out these other guys, while they're frozen?,' asked Storm.

'Sure,' Morgan shrugged.

Morwena moved over to Rudra, and touched her nose to his arm. They formed a private rapport, and conducted a quick, mental argument.

'I still say we should kill him,' she insisted.

He was equally stubborn. 'And I disagree.'

'If we take away his sword, then we can kill him.'

'Maybe, but I'm not gonna try it.'

With that, Rudra broke the contact, walked over to one of the glaukan, and took its crossbow. He examined it carefully. It seemed to be a conventional crossbow, with conventional bolts. But the glaukan was frozen in the act of reaching for a leather pouch, strapped at its thigh. So Rudra took the pouch, too.

Meanwhile, Morgan was still negotiating with Zi'hr. 'Will you surrender your weapon to us, to be returned after this entire affair is over?'

"Not a chance," said Zi'hr flatly.

'Will you depart from the arena?'

Zi'hr sighed. "I wish I could."

'You're trapped like us?'

"Yep."

'Will you side with us? To stop them, not to kill them? Just to stop them. I'm sure you do not want to see your companions die.'

"Well, it wouldn't bother me, frankly. But, in all honesty, I'm not sure you can stop them. And I don't think I want to irritate them to that extent."

'But you will remain passive, then?'

Zi'hr nodded. "Oh, hey, I'm not with them. I'm sittin' here in camp, starin' at the fire, eatin' popcorn. I ain't goin' anywhere."

Rudra frowned at Zi'hr. "Do you think they're gonna continue to

try and hurt us?"

Zi'hr nodded. "Unless you can bloody their nose, they're gonna getcha."

'Okay, first things first,' Morgan ordered briskly, addressing the whole Pack. 'First thing we're gonna do, is take down the two glaukan, and the cats.'

The wolves moved forward, and tore out the throats of the frozen cats and glaukan. Their qualms about killing helpless creatures were fading, as they began to see how serious the threat was to their survival.

Meanwhile, Rudra was opening the pouch he'd liberated. Inside, he found three glass rods about eighteen inches long, each in its own little compartment. They seemed designed to be fired from crossbows. Rudra pulled one out, and inside he could see something like a long, straight twig, with little moving knobs on it, like bugs crawling on a stick.

Morgan glanced over. 'I've never seen anything like that before.'

'Those bug things look alive,' put in Morwena.

"They've got psyche," Rudra commented. "But they're kind of dormant. Like they're locked in there." Thoughtfully, he loaded one of the glass tubes into his crossbow. Then he took the other glaukan's crossbow, and loaded it the same way. He also took the other glaukan's thigh-pouch, so he had four reloads.

'Okay, we're transporting out of here,' ordered Morgan. 'Hmm. Maybe we should kill the horses.'

'The horses we don't need to kill,' protested Storm.

Morgan scanned one, and nodded. 'Yeah, they're just normal horses. We don't need to kill them. From my point of view, the horses are innocent. We'll pop out. Let me scan first.'

He concentrated... and suddenly he stiffened, and fell over. His mind was just... gone from the Pack's mind-link.

"Uh-oh!" said Zi'hr. He picked up his sword, and backed toward the edge of the clearing.

Morwena rushed to her father. She pushed her nose into his fur, feeling for his mind. 'There's nothing, there's just a total block!' she broadcast frantically. 'He's breathing, but where's his mind?!'

"Is it the same kind of block the Nor'cat had?" Rudra demanded.

'No,' she answered. 'Nothing like that. A lot worse than that. He's... it's like his mind's been taken away somewhere.'

"Try to trace it," Rudra urged.

'What do you think I've been doing? Only, there's no thread for me to follow. He's just not around here.'

Worried, T'Pring reached out to Morwena, and used the Pack-mind to check Morgan. She couldn't trace his mind, either.

Morwena took a deep breath, and forced herself to be calm. She

looked thoughtfully at Rudra. 'Two crossbows... I could change to human, and take one of them. But it takes me awhile to change, and I doubt we have that long.'

Rudra frowned and looked at Zi'hr, while pointing at Morgan. "What did they do to him?" he asked. But Zi'hr, sword in hand, had reached the edge of the clearing, and just stood there, looking around nervously.

Storm, also nervous, edged off toward the woods in a different direction.

Abruptly, three figures on horseback appeared in the clearing's center: Vasca, Pharcis, and Tami'nell with her whip. No Nor'cats or glaukan were with them.

Swiftly, Rudra laid one of his crossbows on the ground, and trained the other on Vasca.

Vasca looked at Rudra with some surprise. "Are these your wolves?" he asked.

"This is my Pack," answered Rudra quietly.

Zi'hr called out to Vasca, "I keep telling you guys, these wolves *belong* to somebody."

Morwena growled at the suggestion of ownership.

"Why are you hunting wolves?" Rudra asked Vasca.

Vasca shrugged. "They've got nice pelts."

Morwena growled again, and crouched, as if to spring at Vasca.

Rudra still held Vasca's gaze. "Does this change the status quo any?"

At that moment Niemand, still watching unseen by anyone present, took action.

Suddenly, Morgan awoke. He didn't move. He just reached out with his mind, to T'Pring.

Morwena sent a thought to Rudra. 'Make them go away, or I'm going to kill one of them.'

Siggan's eyes lit up. 'Let's get him. Daddy, is that okay? Let's get him.'

Morwena kept up a low, steady, growl. 'Maybe Rudra can make them go away. Otherwise, I'm gonna get them.'

Rudra asked Vasca again, "Does this change your position at all? Are you still intent on hunting them?"

Vasca looked disappointed. "They're *all* yours?"

'This whole Shadow is yours,' Morwena prompted her brother.

That sounded good to Rudra. "This whole world is ours."

"What do you mean, *ours?*" Vasca demanded, frowning.

That threw Rudra off a little. "I mean, we roam all over the place."

"What do you mean, *we?*" Vasca pursued.

Rudra gestured slightly, with his head, to the whole Pack. He did

this without moving his hands from the crossbow.

Vasca looked impatient. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. But are they all yours, or not?"

They just weren't talking the same language. Rudra tried again. "They are all my Pack. We are all of the same Pack."

Vasca shrugged, obviously giving up the puzzle. "Well, tell you what. You killed sixteen of ours, we'll take sixteen of yours. How's that?"

"We don't have sixteen," Rudra protested.

"What do you mean, you don't have sixteen?" Vasca asked skeptically.

"There's only twelve."

"Well, there's only twelve here, but what do you mean you don't have sixteen?"

"These aren't the same as those."

"What do you mean, they aren't the same as those? You killed sixteen of our creatures, we'll kill sixteen of yours. That's fair."

"What about all the animals you've killed already? If we start adding it up that way, things could get real messy."

"I'm talking about, you know, things with nice pelts. Big, important, interesting creatures."

"Well, I don't think the cats have such nice pelts."

Vasca only shrugged. Tami'nell frowned ferociously... at the slight to her pets, or at their death, or both.

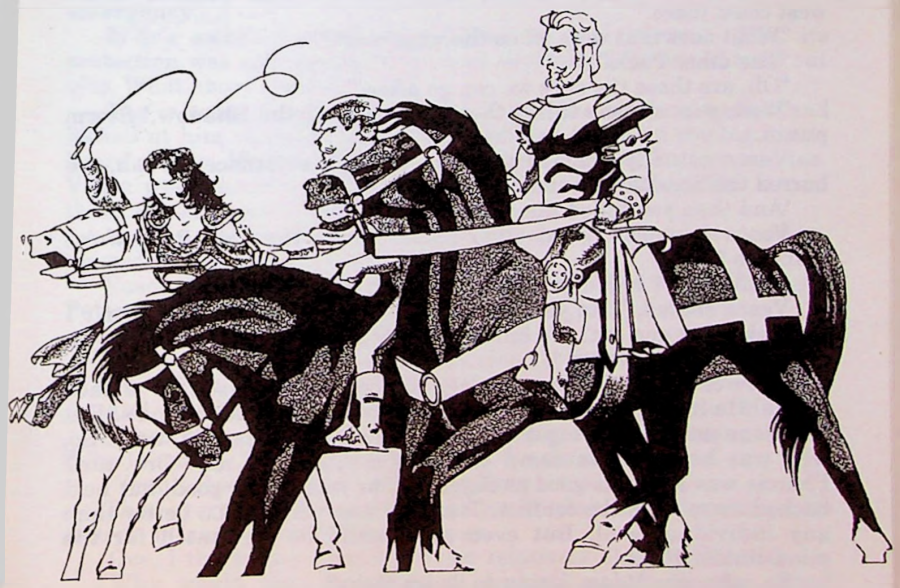
Meanwhile, over the Pack link, comments were flying.

'I can take out the horses' minds,' Storm announced. 'Any time now. That should startle them, and they won't have that advantage.'

'I don't like this guy with the beard. I think he should buy it,' was Morwena's comment.

'But Daddy said to wait,' protested Siggan.

'Dad? Dad? Can we kill them now? Noow!' asked Morwena. Even her thoughts were deforming into snarls. She was very close to losing it with rage.



'Yes, let us kill them now, Daddy,' Siggan chimed in, her eyes lighting up. 'Please, it'll be such fun!'

'Wait!' Morgan ordered. 'I'm bringing up the Pattern.'

Rudra could follow these thoughts. But he kept most of his attention focussed on Vasca. "Look, it's like this. Every one of these wolves can speak and think, just like you."

Vasca looked at him oddly. "So what?"

"So, they're not mine. They belong to themselves."

"Well, the things you killed could speak and think. What of it?"

"Yeah, but not as well as you, or us."

"Yeah, you and us, sure. But these are wolves."

Morwena hurled a snarling though at Vasca: 'Why, you arrogant son of a bitch!'

Vasca smiled, a cockly little smile. "Yeah, they got psychic power too," he said still speaking only to Rudra. "So? That'll make them more interesting game. All we want is sixteen of them. You've got a whole world full, what's the big problem?"

"There isn't a whole world full," Rudra protested. "This is it."

"This is it?"

"This is it. Well, you already killed the ones that were off on the west coast there."

"What ones that were off on the west coast?"

"The other Pack."

"Oh, are those the ones we can go after?"

'Well, you already killed them, and barred the Shadow,' Storm put in.

Vasca actually deigned to notice Storm's existence. "Yeah, we barred the Shadow. So what?"

'And then you killed the other Pack.'

Vasca frowned. "What other Pack? You're the only Pack we've found so far."

'You haven't killed any others?' Storm was astonished.

Vasca smiled. "Not yet." He turned back to Rudra. "Why don't I just take that one out? It's kinda scrawny anyway." He gestured with his head toward Storm.

Morwena and Siggan, closely joined, were poised to attack Vasca. He had a decent psyche: a little better than Morwena's. But Morwena and Siggan together should be able to take him, easy. So, why was he acting so damn cocky? Was it just an act? Or... not? Pharcis was about as good as Siggan. Zi'hr was pretty good, but he'd backed away from the conflict. Tami'nell was very good... better than any individual wolf. But even she should be no match for the mind-linked Pack.

So, why was Vasca acting so damn cocky?

Through her bloodlust, Morwena was starting to have a very bad

feeling. Her unease spread through the Pack's collective mind like a red stain of worry. The Pack reacted, in the way of cornered wolves, with a rising tension.

Any minute, something was going to break, and start the killing.

Desperately, Rudra shifted into haggling mode. "I'll tell you what," he told Vasca. "You can have twenty-four bison, in exchange for the fourteen cats. And we'll throw in a couple boars, and you can take two moose free of charge. We'll just toss it in as a fluff."

Vasca hesitated.

Rudra plunged ahead. "Tell you what, before you turn that down, I can see you're thinking it's not enough, it's not enough. We've got some bears. Talk about pelts. You can make yourself a *nice* rug. Warm, you know?"

"Take it, take it!" cried Zi'hr. "Good deal!"

Pharcis looks up, rubbing his stubbly muzzle. "I don't care," he said indifferently.

Tami'nell looked angry... after all, the nor'cats were hers. But she said nothing, either for or against Rudra's offer.

Morgan, by that time, had the Pattern up. He started scanning the enemy, for artifacts that might generate psychic blocks in an emergency.

Zi'hr's sword jumped immediately to his attention. But, its protection was only around Zi'hr, and hopefully Zi'hr would keep out of it. What about Vasca?

The moment he started to scan Vasca, the big man turned and looked at him sharply. There was a puzzled frown on the big man's bearded face. Morgan could see that Vasca had the Pattern up, too. Vasca was deinitely an advanced adept of the Pattern. The two of them stared at each other.

Morgan got to his feet, and walked slowly across the clearing, toward Vasca.

Vasca glanced sidelong at Rudra. "How is it that the wolf has got Pattern?"

"He's from Amber," Rudra replied.

Vasca's eybrows shot up, and his eyes got very wide. "*What?*"

"He's from Amber," Rudra repeated.

And, just like that, Vasca and his friends vanished into thin air.

There was a moment of startled silence in the clearing. Then Zi'hr laughed. "Well, I guess that was the magic word."

"Yeah," Rudra agreed, starting to laugh too.

Then everyone was laughing, the pre-battle tension breaking into shards of laughter and slipping away.

'Gee, I think they must know our relatives!' chortled Morwena.

'Why would they be afraid of Amber?' asked Morgan. 'And where do you come from, that you have a Pattern I cannot

recognize?'

"Who, me?" asked Zi'hr deprecatingly.

'Yes.'

"Oh, you know my Pattern."

'Where are *you* from, then?' asked Morwena.

"I'm from a place you know as Dross."

'And these other guys, where did they come from?'

Zi'hr hesitated. "Another place."

'Just sort of wandered in?' Morwena's tone was ironic.

Zi'hr shrugged. "Well, hey, look. If I tell you..."

"You'll tell two friends, they'll tell two friends, and soon everybody will know," put in Rudra.

Zi'hr grinned. "You got it, kid."

'Have they unbarred our Shadow?' asked Morwena.

Zi'hr smiled. "I think they probably will. I think they've taken off running."

Morwena laughed. 'They have heard about our relatives.'

Zi'hr nodded. "Yeah."

Morgan put in, 'As they acted in ignorance, total ignorance, I'll owe them nothing, should we ever meet again. And thank you for staying out of it.' He offered a paw, and Zi'hr gravely shook it.

Rudra held up his crossbow. "What do these things do, anyway?"

Zi'hr grinned. "Oh, they're neat. Easy enough. Shoot that horse. Don't worry, it won't hurt him."

Rudra shot one of the spare horses Vasca's party had left behind, in their haste to depart. When Rudra pulled the trigger, the string snapped the glass, and the stick flew across the clearing, into the horse's side. It penetrated, leaving no more than a tiny, red mark. There was a little pause. The horse shied nervously, having felt the pinprick.

Then, to the startlement of the whole Pack, the horse's psyche faded out.

"It's psyche is being consumed!" Rudra exclaimed.

'Won't hurt it, huh?' asked Morwena skeptically.

"It won't hurt it, because its psyche is so negligible," explained Zi'hr.

Rudra nodded. 'It never used its psyche anyway.'

Zi'hr looked at Morwena. "You see, basically, what's going to happen is, the thing will die inside the horse. But if the thing went into somebody like *you*, it could *live* on you." He smiled at the assembled Pack. "Well, I guess it's time for me to be running along..."

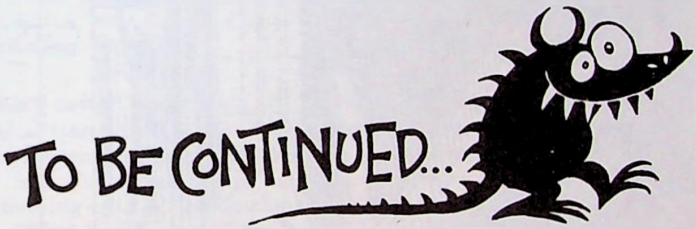
With a bow to all of them, Zi'hr vanished. Obviously, the Shadow had been unbarred.

Niemand, his presence still unsuspected, also slipped away. In

due course, Vagrant could give Azeroth a satisfactory report.

The danger was over, and the Pack's normal, pleasant life went on as before.

But they never did find out what had happened to the other Pack.



I know that at least some dragons talk. I try hailing this one by yelling, "I am Carolan, Son of Random, King of all Reality. Who are you?"

The View From a Dungeon Cell

Carolan's Diary

by Don Woodward

(An Amber Diary, Based on a Campaign by Erick Wujcik)

It was a brivj5\...

Christ Jesus! How the hell did people ever use these Bloody bastards, anyway? There's not even a correctotape or whatever they were called on this one and I've only one bottle of White Out left.

I laugh at myself, 'You are locked up in the dungeons, sport.' Maybe you should consider yourself lucky that Benedict remanded Jeager's orders and that they unchained you from the walls. Besides there isn`t a Bloody electric typewriter or word processor in all of Amber, at least there shouldn't be.'

I could probably Trump out of this hole the way Corwin did and shift to a Shadow where these contrary little buggers can type for themselves. But I gave Benedict my word and at the moment my word seems to be the last vestige of honor that I have left to cling to.

I try again:

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

That's better! Great stuff, eh? I read somewhere, I think it was during my stay at Harvard, that the above is one of the most dramatic attention getting first sentences ever written. Too bad it's by George Orwell and not me.

Me? I've been sitting here for two hours trying to come up with something equally eye catching.

"What have you got?" you ask.

"Nada."

Pretty pathetic, eh? Especially when you consider how many worlds consider me the inspiration for their bards and poets. I do the muse thing for artists, too, but very few of them can write either. Thank the Unicorn that unlike Morgan and some of my other more egotistical brethren I have avoided godhood and have always preferred being an ideal rather than an idol. Talk about acute embarrassment, imagine the God of Bards and Poets stumbling through simple prose.

Sweet Jesus! Right now I'd even settle for:

It was starting to end, after what seemed most of eternity to me.

I wonder how long it took Corwin to come up with that one? I can't afford writer's block at this point, it can't be that many hours to dawn. My real talents are in music and art. But this is too long and complex a story to tell in a song or a painting. Maybe an epic poem. Yeah, a poem, that's the ticket. An epic poem set to music, or maybe even an Opera. I've certainly got enough pathos and tragedy to sling around. Nah, there's just not enough time.

Look since this is supposed to be a confession of sorts I might as well be honest with you. The problem isn't my writing, yes my prose is a little weak, but that is not the problem and it's not my poor typing skills either. It isn't even writer's block. 'Tis fear. Put simply, I'm afraid to look into my own soul. Afraid of what I might find there.

I've always claimed that Amber deserved better than what she got. That most of the Family didn't deserve their powers and abilities. I had all these lofty ideals and played the hero. Now look at what I've become.

I still can't accept her death. I keep hoping this is all a bad dream and that I'll wake up in Texorami in my mother's arms but that 'tisn't going to happen. Llewella is dead and the Bloody Fucking Hero of the Multi-verse is a condemned criminal.

I know, I know, you're thinking why doesn't he cut to the chase, get to the point, face the music. Well hey, why don't you try pouring your guts out onto paper. Why don't you try explaining your *feelings* when your so torn up inside that you can barely feel the Pattern when you're sitting right on top of the Bloody thing. Why don't you...

But you don't have to, do you? You didn't kill one of your favorite aunts now, did you? You're not the one who is going to be banished at dawn and you don't feel the need to leave something behind besides the court records of an inquisition run by a mad man do you?

I keep wondering how Morgan does it. How does he sit there so calmly and accept everything that has happened? Can he really believe that he is innocent?

Why am I doing this? Who is it that I need to understand what happened two days ago? Is it you? Or me? Since I'm not suppose to give a damn about any of you I must be doing it for myself.

My guilt will never go away but if I can at least understand..., Maybe, just maybe, I can face tomorrow.

> *"A hero is no braver than the ordinary man, but is braver five minutes longer."*
>
> *– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

After rejuvenating myself in Aquarella I decided I was ready to brave the Real World once more and so I returned to Amber. Fiona was pleased to see me and wanted to know all about what I had learned during my travels.

Flora, in contrast, only wanted to know about my adventures. I was only too happy to see both of them; no matter how pleasant a vacation is, there's still nothing like returning home. And I was beginning to think of Amber as home, or, at least, my home away from home.

I'd been back about a week when Dad, who you'd call King Random, called me into the throne room; there he explained that he was declaring me the Heir to the Throne and introduced me to two men. One was tall and lean, dressed in buckskins and winged boots, and had a quick carefree smile. The other one was my height, dressed all in black padded armour, carried a heavy bladed sword, and had one of the grimmest countenances I had seen since coming to Amber; I mean this guy made Benedict look like Flora. The one with the smile was named Gwyntbrawd and the solemn one was Morgan. They were suppose to be brothers but except for their white hair I couldn't see any resemblance.

Dad informed me that Morgan and Gwynt, as he preferred to be called, were going to be my 'protectors'.

I, of course, protested. In a calm collected voice I explained to Dad that I was over twenty-one and no longer in need of babysitter's, and if I did need one I would get Mouse.

Dad was likewise calm in explaining that he wasn't asking for my permission, just explaining my new status as Heir, "If you like, you can think of them as Secret Service agents," he informed me.

What could I do? He was my father and King of Reality to boot!

Now I understood what this Morgan guy was so grim about. I don't think he was any more thrilled about this situation than I was.

Once we were away from Dad, he admitted as much. After a wee bit of posturing and debate, just to establish the peeking order, we finally decided that if we worked together on this thing all three of us could survive it.

Gwynt explained that both Morgan and himself had cloudy backgrounds and that being associated with the Heir to the Throne would lend them an air of legitimacy. He felt that Dad was trying to integrate them into Amber society as much as 'sit on' me. Morgan just thought it was a bad deal we were all stuck with.

Gwynt suggested that we could use a base of operations and Morgan agreed. He felt that if we had a common ground somewhere besides Amber we wouldn't have to give up our private Shadows.

I agreed mostly because I didn't want either of these guys nosing around in my private business anyway. We sat down and discussed the type of place that would suit each of us and discovered that we all share an interest in Celtic cultures. After a little hunting we dug up Annwyn.

Annwyn is a very Celtic sort of place. The men all wear braids and big mustaches, gold torcs, tatoos, and kilts and leg wrappings. They like to go around bare-chested and appear to be born on their horses. The women favor cloth with colorful intricate patterns and elaborate gold brocade, gold torcs, bracelets, and arm bands and seem to run things except when there is a war

going on.

Morgan and Gwynt are both Gods in Annwyn but I prefer to have the people think of me as a human raised to deific proportions. I am the inspiration and patron of Bards and Poets and hold similar rank in Annwyn's pantheon of Deities as Math.

Morgan suggested that we bar Annwyn from other Amberites and it was while we were gathering these bars and putting them in place that I first encountered Pegasus.

I was off in Shadow looking for a herd of man-eating Pegasi to guard Annwyn's high passes and I'd found just the sort of herd I wanted but it was being guarded by a stallion who was much more than what he seemed. Pegasus had apparently run off or killed this herd's natural stallion and had taken his mares and foals. I anticipated trouble with this big dangerous looking 'winged horse' but for some reason that I still don't really understand he took to me. He spoke to me in my mind, in much the same manner that Aquarians do, and volunteered to relocate his herd in Annwyn's high mountains. We have been travelling together ever since.

Pegs, by the by, is not a horse with wings, like everyone seems to think, he's a Greek God. Don't scoff, 'tis true, he sprang from the blood that dripped from Medusa's severed head. But what he was doing in that Shadow where I found him, besides making little pegasi, is still a mystery to me.

Our being together is his idea not mine; he could have chosen Morgan or Gwynt, to travel with, or none of us at all but he didn't, he chose me. He's my friend and companion, not my pet or my slave. With his special ability to anticipate my moves and desires and his power to move through shadow he is always around when I want or need him but he comes to me out of friendship not servitude.

Now you know how I came to be Heir and how I got stuck with Morgan and Gwynt.

Though I am far underground the Trump window I drew in the wall of my dungeon cell reveals that false dawn is coming to The Arden. I have little time remaining and have yet to get to the matters that you really need to know about.

Very well, I will try to tell you about The Black Dragon, Brand, the Abyss, the Unicorn, Bright, Reaper, the Battle between Brand's sons, Caine's hand, the Land of the Dead, Jeager and Nara, and Llewella's death with as little hindsight and histrionics as is humanly possible. I want you to see what was going though my mind then, not now, and perhaps in that way we can yet find the answer that I need to face the coming dawn.

"The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent full of doubt."

– Bertrand Russell

I'd been in Aquarella on Garrets's World Shadow for about a week, just

enjoying myself with Alea. Aquarella is an underwater kingdom inhabited by aquatic telepaths and the only place besides home where I can really relax, including Annwyn. Not even the strange dreams I'd been having could spoil my pleasure at keeping company with Aquarians.

What a contrast they make to Amberites. I've seen telepathic races who keep their minds locked up tighter than a Brink's Car. But Aquarians are all so open and loving that Aquarella could pass for a 60's commune. All that excess love needs a focus and in Aquarella they focus it on their Princess Alea, and she in turn loves me.

Alea rests her beautiful blonde head on my chest as we bask in the afterglow of what I teasingly refer to as spawning when the dream comes to me again. The Unicorn is trapped in a fiery lava strewn hellscape right out of Dante's inferno (or the creation of the world depending on your metaphysics), and threatened by a black dragon. Only this time I'm not asleep and the feeling of foreboding that accompanies the vision is so overwhelming it can no longer be ignored. With a heavy heart I abandon Alea and swim toward the surface. I know Pegasus will be waiting when I arrive. With his special ability to anticipate my moves and his power to move through Shadow he is always around when I want or need him.

Halfway up I get a Trump contact from Gwyntbrawd. Something is wrong and he wants me in Annwyn. Of my two protectors, Gwynt has always been the least domineering. He is not nearly as grim faced about everything as Morgan and even seems to understands the heroic ideal. I like him; he has always acted more like my friend than my babysitter. I reach out my hand and he pulls me through.

"What's going on?" I demand while untangling myself from his big fisted grip. Gwynt is tall and gangly and built more like Benedict than Morgan who is supposed to be his brother. Except for their white hair and the fact that no one knows their true origins, those two have little in common. I probably know them better than most and it is hard for even me to imagine them as brothers.

He stares at me a moment then breaks into a big grin. I look down to see what he is grinning at and realize that I am naked and dripping wet. Bloody Hell! My clothes are all in Pegasus' saddlebags. I shrug and head up to my rooms where I dry off and get dressed.

As I walk down the stairs one of the servants tells me that Gwynt is in the great hall with his guests. I push open the huge oak doors that lead to the hall with next to no effort. Since the doors are ten feet high and five feet across one would have done me quite nicely but I try to effect a dramatic entrance whenever its possible. As soon as the doors swing open I see cousins.

We have a saying in our Family about brothers that also holds true for cousins.

Something had better be wrong and it had better be Bloody important! Annwyn is supposed to be our secret barred shadow. What was the point of

rounding up herds of flesh eating Pegasi, giants, and other legendary beasties and posting them as sentries if Gwynt and Morgan are just going to show everyone the front door?

I glare at Gwynt and demand, "What are they doing here?" Then under my breath I ask, "What was the point of going to all the trouble of placing those Bloody bars if you're going to invite half the Family in here, eh?"

His uncharacteristically grim countenance makes him look just like Morgan, as if putting lie to what I just said about their not being brothers.

"There's trouble in Amber." He says it like it explains everything.

About this time Pegasus arrives. He gives me an irritated look, 'I hate it when you do that,' he chides.

I shrug and he scowls.

Well, he anticipates most of my moves, anyway.

I leap onto Pegs' back, turn to Gwynt, and explain, "Whatever is wrong in Amber will have to wait, the Unicorn needs help."

"To the assembled multitude I yell, "Follow Me!"

I must confess that I am a little disappointed in their reaction. That 'Follow me!' bit always worked so well in Shadow. But then these are cousins and not dependable Shadow folks.

I try again; this time yelling, "The Unicorn is dying!" That at least got a raised eyebrow from Harlan, Dworkin's foundling waif, who may or may not be a cousin. Julian's son, Derek, looks over to his buddy Dameon, who's mother was Deirdre, and shrugs. Dameon looks from me to Derek, smiles, and twirls his first finger around his temple. I've never cared much for Derek and Dameon. Their nonchalant attitude is typical of my family and is, in my opinion, its greatest failing.

'All this is all taking far to long,' I tell Pegasus as I send him a mental picture of the place in my reoccurring dream, 'You get us there and I'll drag along the others.'

Pegs rears dramatically, flaps his wings once, and begins to gallop. Without waiting for the others reactions I yell, "We ride to save the Unicorn!" and begin to shift the lot of them. I look down and see that good ol' Gwynt is pacing us. It is really amazing how fast he can run with those winged boots of his. If only they didn't look so ludicrous with his buckskins. As soon as the Castle's stone floor turns to grass the Dynamic Duo, Derek and Dameon, Shift their mounts to them. I gave them that nickname because whenever I see them together, which is most of the time, they seem to be in some kind of fix just like Batman and Robin on television. Harlan, however, seems so startled by the fact that Annwyn Castle has just turned into a white-washed thatched roof cottage that he doesn't know what to. As Derek and Dameon ride off he comes to his senses and a horse appears in a splash of rainbow colors.

Derek rides abreast of me on Landguard, who is nearly as big as his sire Morgenstern, and Dameon follows on a much less imposing beast. Bringing up the rear and rushing to catch up is Harlan. I tell Pegs that we

have to be careful not to lose him because he is Pattern blind and cannot shift shadow. But Pegasus is of the opinion that Harlan's horse Rembrandt, though not a God himself, can keep Harlan out of trouble if he manages to get lost.

Though he can easily out run all of us, I offer a hand to Gwynt. When he accepts it I pull him up onto Pegs back and explain, "'Tis easier to talk this way."

He nods and I explain to the four of them about my dream. Gwynt suggests there may be a connection between what I have been dreaming and the trouble in Amber. I ask him what this *trouble* is and he tells me that something bad is happening to Amber, that reality seems to be fading away. He also says that many of the elders, including my father, Fiona, Benedict, Gérard, and Julian, may be trapped or worse. As he tells his story Dameon and Derek nod in various places making me think that at least parts of his tale must belong to them. After Gwynt is finished Harlan looks like he has something to say. When I ask what's on his mind he tells me that Dworkin is acting strangely, even for him, and that the Primal Pattern seemed to be blinking on and off when they left it.

The Third Generation, or at least half of it, follows me though Shadow; each successive shift brings us into rougher and rockier lands and it becomes hotter and hotter until we are riding around bubbling mud flats and lava flows. Though I have lead many Shadow warriors this is the first opportunity I've had to lead *real* folk. But as it is with all glory, my moment is fleeting. Just as I am about to ask where Morgan is, Gwynt disappears in a rainbow blur.

Shortly thereafter the volcanic landscape through which we had been riding flattens and becomes a vast desert covered by coarse yellow sand. I sense that in order to reach our goal we have to go forward, but our way is blocked by a wall of blackness. Near the wall the heat is so intense that even Pegasus begins to sweat.

The four of us dismount to get a better look. Derek takes a coin from his pocket and heaves it at the wall but instead of making physical contact it vanishes. There was no flash, sparks, thump, or bang. It simply ceases to exist. We continue to sweat and investigate but cautiously and with much more care.

'You are in danger here.' Pegs warns. Usually I don't ignore Pegs' warnings, about such things, his sense for danger is far more acute than mine. But this time there seems little choice. The Unicorn is on the other side of that wall.

Dameon reaches a hand toward the ebony barrier.

'Not a good idea!' Pegs shouts to him psychically.

Dameon pulls his hand back, looks around and asks, "Huh?"

I smile at Pegs and he shakes his head and snorts. Dameon has never heard his mental *voice* before. Like I said, most of my cousins still think of Pegs as a horse with wings. For some reason he seems to prefer it that way,

so I've never made an issue of it. After a minute of searching for the voice Dameon shrugs and goes back to studying the wall, but he doesn't try to touch it again.

Without further physical examination I can only come to the conclusion that the barrier is not really a wall at all, but a hot void of nothingness. I understand how redundant that is, but twice nothing or perhaps nothingness folded in on itself is the impression you got from looking at the Bloody thing!

I feel especially stupid when Dameon eyes me and asks, "Well?" and Derek chirps in with, "What's next?"

But I am able to avoid looking as dumbfounded as I feel by the timely arrival of Morgan, Dennifer, and Gwynt.

Dennifer is my only female cousin and nearly as beautiful as her mother. Though Flora has never acknowledged her, everyone in Amber just assumes that Dennifer is her daughter. Their resemblance is just to strong to deny.

As I update the new arrivals on the little we have learned Pegs complains that it is getting hotter. Now that he mentions it I can feel the increase. I had noticed it earlier but thought it an illusion created by looking at Morgan in his traditional black padded body armor. Dennifer who is dressed in a white string bikini and body oil, is the only one of us who looks comfortable. I smile to myself as I note that the newcomers footprints have white sand in them, not yellow. They must have found Dennifer at that beach in Cabra she loves so much.

Morgan and Derek seem to be arguing, but then that is nothing new or unusual, suddenly, as if to emphasis some point of his point Derek tosses another coin. This one melts a little before vanishing into the wall.

Dennifer bends over, affording me a panoramic view of a truly magnificent fanny and picks up a handful of sand, "Awesome Beach, dudes," she remarks with a grin.

Morgan stops arguing with Derek long enough to glare at her. She lets the sand sift through her fingers, gives him a dazzling smile full of perfectly white teeth, and slips a golden arm through one of mine. I've recently become convinced that Dennifer uses most of that California surfer lingo just because it irks so many of the older folks in Amber.

Dennifer has always been one of my favorite cousins, even if she does seem to enjoy irking people, especially those in authority. When we were younger I always thought that she showed so much attention to me because we were the only two in the family under forty. But now I wonder if she just doesn't enjoy making Morgan see red. I accept her arm and Morgan gives her a look that would kill a mere Shadow dweller. I can't help but flash her a big grin which makes him even madder. I know I'm in for another of his speeches about improprieties with family members, but one of Dennifer's smiles is worth it.

Dameon joins Derek and Morgan's yelling match. Their

disagreement about the nature of the wall reminds me of the time when I was small and my mother explained to me that 'little boys' playing in the street have arguments but that she and my father, 'have discussions'. Despite Derek and Dameon's advice, to the contrary, Morgan decides to try his prized spear against the ebony barrier. Before he throws it, though, he rigs up a line so that he can pull it back from wherever it goes. When he is ready he hefts the spear and gives it a mighty heave. The head and most of the haft penetrate the wall. The section within the void glows brightly, and then the whole thing fades away. Morgan's face is usually as easy to read as *War and Peace* so even Gwynt and myself are surprised when he looks shocked by the results.

"I tried to tell you," Derek snickers.

Morgan spins on him and another *discussion* is about to start when I interrupt them by slapping the side of my head and swearing, "Christ Jesus!"

Everyone including Morgan and Derek look at me.

"I've just figured out what's wrong," I explain, "This is not the place of my dream 'tis Amber, herself! Kolvir and all of Amber lay within this Bloody tenebrous void."

Dennifer squeezes my arm and whispers, "This is bad."

"'Tis very bad, indeed!" I whisper back.

"Tenebrous," sneers Derek, "Is that what they taught you at Harvard?"

"This is Bloody serious, man! Maybe you'd best be asking yourself what sort of power could do this t'Amber and the Pattern instead o'making jokes." Whenever I get my *Irish* up it tends to sneak out in my voice.

It occurs to me that if this barrier is truly the wall it seems, then maybe we can Trump past it. I let go of Dennifer and walk over to Harlan, "Do you have a Trump of the Pattern?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Could you make one?"

His dark brown eyes widen in a frightened look and he shakes his head again.

Poor Harlan, I pity him. Though it has been less that twenty Amber years since I walked it, I can no longer even imagine life without the Pattern. To never see the Pattern's beauty or feel the caress of it's touch would be a handicap far worse than being blind or deaf. But to be terrified by it the way Harlan is, to see it as something hideous, that is truly unimaginable.

Morgan informs us that this void is not a thing of Chaos. How or why he should know of such things, I have no idea. I've been with him, off and on, for several years now, and even though he is my officially designated protector his secret abilities never cease to amaze me. He is continually displaying new talents and always seems to have a card or two up his sleeve, sometimes quite literally.

I am just about to ask him how he would know such a thing when a

tremendous roar fills the area. It seems to come from everywhere at once and is the sort of sound that even the deaf or dead could hear. You feel sounds like this in your bones as much as hear them with your ears. There is a second soul shattering bellow and the wall begins to solidify and take shape. The others retreat but I stand, well actually I'm seated on Pegs, and watch as it takes form. Pegs takes wing so we can get a better look at what the humongous back shape is becoming. Eventually it becomes a giant (if the word giant can be used to describe something miles and miles across) black dragon.

I try to reach it mentally. It bellows out rage and tries to rend my mind but I am able to defend against its attack. Like the dinosaurs of prehistoric times its mind must be small and weak in comparison to its vast size.

I've fought dragons in Missikamma Shadow, a magical place with elves and dragons and all sorts of other fantastic creatures. So I know that at least some dragons talk. I try hailing this one by yelling, "I am Carolan, Son of Random, King of all Reality. Who are you?"

It screams and spits fire. Most dragons can do that too, I think ruefully as the flames flash toward my face. Just as I am about to throw my hands in front of my face in a useless gesture, I find that I am no longer where the flames are. When I open my eyes I see the ground rushing upward and can feel the pull of gravity as Pegs pulls out of a power dive.

'Time to back off Cory,' he explains in a slightly scolding tone.

'Tis a good thing Pegs has more sense in such matters than I and a Bloody good thing I was on his back, otherwise I'd be charbroiled like a quarter pound burger right now. As we withdraw the ebony monster tries to pursue us but seems blocked by some sort of invisible barrier.

The others are nowhere to be seen. I use my Trump to make contact with Morgan, who seems to have organized an observation post at a strategically safe distance several shadows away.

He pulls me through, "You can still see the big bastard from here!" he shouts as Pegs lands next to Dennifer.

When I slide off his back she looks into my eyes and quietly asks, "Are you alright."

I give her a reassuring smile and confess, "'Twas the biggest fire ball I've ever seen!" She slips her arm around my waist and we both turn to face Morgan. I am grateful for the moral support she offers me in facing down my protector's wrath.

I don't always understand my feelings for Dennifer, especially at times like these. Unlike Alea, in Aquarella, and Ailwinne, in Missikamma, she has few aspects of my idealized woman. Could that be why I feel attracted to her, because she is real and not a creation of my desires. Or is it because she reminds me of Fiona?

"What the Hell was that all about?" yells Morgan while advancing on us, "I can't afford to have your father coming after me at a time like this!"

"I've a feeling that Random's anger is the least of your worries at the

moment. When I touched that things mind," he glares at me, "Alright when it touched mine. Either way it comes out the same.

The point is that the thing is pure evil. Not chaotic as in from the Courts of Chaos just plain old fashioned evil but a Bloody big capital 'E'.

Dennifer tugs on my sleeve, "Look!"

I follow the length of a perfectly formed bronze colored arm and see the Dragon. Whatever barrier was holding it back seems to be collapsing. The others begin to retreat. Again I hold my ground.

'What are you looking for,' I ask myself. If only I knew, a clue I suppose. Something, anything, that will help us save Amber. Some of my relatives might not be worth the effort but it is not just Family that is endangered by this behemoth, but eternally perfect Amber herself.

'We've got a little time yet Cory but she's going to slow us down a little this time so be ready when I yell.'

I look next to me and am surprised to see Dennifer still at my side. She smiles at me. I look back to the Dragon. Its advance is stopped periodically as though it is crashing against further invisible barriers. Each time it does it rages and thrashes about for awhile before beginning to move again. As the monster approaches I feel Dennifer's hand slip into mine. Suddenly I am hit by inspiration.

"That's it!" I cry, "It's eating Shadows. Each time it stops its to destroy another shadow!" I leap to Pegasus' back and pull Dennifer up behind me. "Let's go tell the others."

Is it my imagination, or does she cling just a little tighter than safety requires?

By the time we get back to the others and explain my theory the Dragon is almost upon us. Morgan, Dennifer, Dameon, and Harlan retreat. Gwynt with his boots of speed, Derek on Landguard, and myself on Pegasus agree to stand our ground until the last possible moment so that we can observe what happens to a shadow when it is consumed.

As soon as the Dragon breaks though the last barrier/Shadow between it and our own the ground beneath Landguard and Gwynt's feet begins to lose color and fade. I yell to my cousins that it might be time for them to take off and they agree. Whatever it is that is happening seems to start at ground level. It's my guess that Pegs and I will be safe enough up here in the sky for a while longer. I am wrong. This particular Shadow seems to be crumbling faster than the others. It's rapid disintegration catches even Pegs by surprise.

When the tip of his tail starts to lose color he gives me a wry mental grin and says, 'I think we may be cutting this a little close, Cory.'

"Let's get out of here," I agree.

I had been holding a Trump contact with Dennifer open just in case a rapid exit became necessary. It turns out to have been a wise precaution. She Trumps us both through. As the rainbow effect starts to fade Pegs pulls up sharply. An armful of this particular Greek God would be a bit much even

for a girl of Dennifer's unusual talents. I, on the other hand, let myself slide directly into her waiting arms.

As the last burst of color fades I lower my hands so that they materialize on her butt instead of around her waist. I expect a reprimand but instead of righteous indignation I get a coy smile. Damn! If I live forever, and with any luck at all I will, there will never seem to be time enough for the things I want to do. Right now, for instance, stopping the end of all reality seems to be more important than flirting with my beautiful blonde cousin. More's the pity.

After some more discussion Morgan decides to Trump us all to Ygg. He speculates that the Marches between Amber and Chaos ought to be safe enough from the Dragon at the moment. I have heard of Ygg but have never had occasion to visit him until now.

When we arrive Derek greets the Great Tree and asks it what is wrong with the Universe.

"Nothing, that I can see," is the Tree's only reply.

Ygg is either unaware of the danger or even more enigmatic than our parents and elders in Amber are.

We decide to rest in a prettily wooded little vale. Dennifer disappears behind some trees and comes back with a rust colored mini-dress, matching pumps, and a single strand of pearls. The outfit compliments her bronze skin and sun bleached hair beautifully. Morgan pulls a blanket out of somewhere and each of us retrieves our favorite picnic dish out of shadow. I'm just biting into a leg of Kentucky Fried Chicken (Extra Crispy), when a fog bank rolls in. Barely a second after Morgan comments on the slim chance of the fog being a natural occurrence, a female centaur, all decked out in high-tech accoutrements, emerges from the fog. Something, perhaps our numbers, startles her and she runs off. Derek and Gwynt decide to pursue her.

When they too disappear into the woods I go back to my chicken. We eat and toss around our various ideas about what has happened to Amber and our parents. I suggest that, whatever it is, the Dragon represents as great a threat to the Courts as it does to Amber and that we may be able to get some help from our opposite numbers. We all compare notes but the only contact any of us has, or is willing to admit he or she has, is Merlin. We try his Trump but cannot obtain a connection.

Dennifer asks Harlan if he can determine the status of Cabra; she is worried about some things she left there. Harlan, in case I didn't mention it, is a Trump Artist. I admire his talent. I am something of an artist, myself, and have always been fascinated by the magical Trumps of our Family, but have always been too busy slaying dragons, rescuing maidens, and righting wrongs to sit down and formally study with Fiona or Dworkin like Harlan has done. He removes a single Trump from a his fat deck and examines it. I peek over his shoulder, it looks like the College of Art in Cabra. I was hoping to pick up a trick or something by watching him but he

doesn't seem to do anything besides activate the card. He tells Dennifer that Cabra seems fine. There is another discussion during which we all seem to agree that Cabra is a lot closer to the action than where we are now. After some very loud discussion we finally all agree to have Harlan Trump us there.

"There ain't no surer way to find out whether you like people or hate them than to travel with them."

– Mark Twain

We arrive in front of the College of Art. Everybody seems to have private affairs they want to sort out so we agree to meet in some tavern called The Cleaved Skull in two hours time.

After we split up I try a few experiments.

First I have Pegs take me to Amber expecting full well to run into the Black Dragon. I am not disappointed. As soon as we spy the back wall I tell Pegs to turn back. I have no intention of forcing it to coalesce into Dragon form. I just wanted to confirm my theory that the Dragon has devoured Amber and that the yellow desert is all that's left of the Primal Plane.

Indeed, this seems to be the case, but the notion raises an interesting metaphysical problem. If the center of all reality is gone, then what's holding everything together? The only answer I can come up with is that, despite Harlan's fears, the Primal Pattern is still intact.

At this point it seems that we can do little more than hope that the Unicorn is trapped somewhere besides Amber. If she was somewhere besides the Grove, and if we can find a way around the Dragon, then we may still be able to effect a rescue.

The second thing I try is making Trump contact with Dad. His Trump behaves strangely, getting warmer the more I concentrate on it. Trumps are normally cool to the touch but Dad's begins to irradiate the same sort of heat we felt near the Dragon. I guess I was secretly hoping that Gwynt was wrong about his being trapped in Amber. Now I have to accept this fact and hope that he was at least wrong about the 'or worse' part.

The third thing I try is a Trump of Texorami. It jumps to life in my hand revealing the outside of my mother's home. As I'm watching, my mother steps out onto the porch and says something to one of the neighbor children. At least everything seems normal at home. Apparently the Dragon is devouring the Shadows closest to Amber first. But, if that's true, I have to wonder how long will it be ere it reaches us in Cabra.

I don't know this Cleaved Skull place, but Pegs is positive he can find it so I leave him in charge of navigation. From the air Cabra looks peaceful enough. People move about their everyday business, blissfully unaware of the danger they are in.

Pegs lands in front of a large building. There is a boar's skull with a woodsman's axe buried in it hanging over the door.

'This must be the place,' I observe as I slide off his back.

'Have I ever steered you wrong?'

'There was that time in Reich Shadow.'

Pegs snorts and shakes his head, 'I could have swore you said warehouse.'

'I said, whorehouse. Why would I have wanted to go to a warehouse?'

'Everything turned out fine didn't it?'

'It could have been a Bloody fiasco! The filthy Nazi's had a Bloody atomic bomb in your damn warehouse. We could have been blown to bits, and taken most of Paris with us!'

'The two of us shot down that New York Bomber, the resistance recovered the bomb, Cary O'Lann got to be a big time hero, and the citizens of Paris and New York were never the wiser. It turned out to be just the sort of pulp adventure you uncovered that Shadow for in the first place.'

"Twas more fun than getting laid...'

'I seem to remember some action with a beautiful redheaded mademoiselle, one of the freedom fighters I believe, who pulled you and the bomb out of the wreckage.'

'Okay, okay. I had a great adventure and got laid, too. But that 'tisn't the point; the point is that you steered me wrong.'

'One lousy transposed vowel and you're never going to let me forget it.'

'Hey, you're the one who brought it up!'

'Some of your cousins are already inside. Why don't you join them and get this over with. I'm not so crazy about the way this place feels.'

'The tavern?'

'No this shadow. I think it's coming.'

I pat Pegs on the neck and go in. As soon as I'm on the inside I can see why Dennifer and Harlan both recommended the place. There's lots of corners and dead spots, perfect for watching your back. And the rustic decor, poor lighting, and smoke filled rooms gave the place the perfect atmosphere for plots and conspiracies. Some of the others are eating, so I order a hot corned beef on grilled rye with dijon mustard.

Eventually everybody shows and we decide to try Merlin one more time. With our combined psyches we get a solid contact this time, but the more we concentrate the hotter his card becomes. Just like Dad's card, I think to myself. I suggest we push it and the others agree. The heat coming from the card becomes painful.

Dameon yells, "Ye...ouch," and then he lets go.

The next to let go is Harlan. He fans his fingers in the air and stares at the rest of us like we are out of our minds. I have little real hope of getting through at this point, but I also realize that this has become a sort of test, like a game of chicken. Dennifer lets go. Morgan looks me in the eyes and smiles. I am determined to beat him. The room begins to grow misty, and the colors less distinct. Morgan lets go. Almost immediately I get a sense of Merlin, suddenly this is no longer a game. If Merlin is trapped the same as

Dad he may need my help. I can't quit. I won't quit. Not when I can almost touch him. I can feel pain in my fingers and hear Morgan yelling, but his voice seems far way.

I gradually become aware of a feeling that is akin to the sensation you get when activating a place Trump. Suddenly there is power all around me. More power than I can imagine and all I have to do is...

A powerful nagging Trump Call distracts me. What was it I wanted to do? Oh, yes the power...

The Call gets stronger, more insistent. I accept, just to be rid it. It is Morgan, no Dennifer, or is it Harlan? I can't tell; it is too difficult to concentrate. Something wrenches my mind and I find myself looking at my burned fingers and a smoking Trump of Merlin.

Morgan glares at me, "This damn job is getting harder everyday. I need to leave for a little while, try not to get in any trouble for about an hour, will you?"

Dameon puts his hand on Morgan's shoulder and they are gone. It didn't seem like they Trumped out but, I'm still a little disoriented so I can't really say for sure.

Dennifer produces a jar of salve from somewhere. She has just opened it and stuck in her finger when Harlan yells, "It's here! the Dragon is in Cabra!"

For the second time the tavern begins to fade out around me. Those of us who remain scatter. I catch up with Dennifer and Harlan. Oh well, one out of two ain't bad. Actually, Harlan's not a bad sort, compared to some of my actual cousins.

I look around. We seem to be in Pallas, a Golden Circle state near Cabra.

Dennifer shrugs, "This place isn't going to last long. It's too close to Cabra."

"We need to get further away," I agree with a nod.

Harlan is worried about Rembrandt, and understandably so. Without his shadow-horse he is as earthbound as any Shadow dweller. I reassure him by pointing out that in a lot of ways animals are smarter than humans. They instinctively bail out of bad situations while two-legged folks let themselves sink deeper and deeper.

Though I am not concerned for his safety, I wouldn't mind if Pegs were here. Walking may be good exercise but it's not very heroic.

We discuss our options. For some reason Harlan wants to find Godfrey. I've never understood their friendship, which, as far as I can tell, is pretty one sided. I see what Godfrey gets out of it; Harlan is one of the only people in this family that will put up with his domineering ego. But what's in it for Harlan?

I look at Dennifer, she shrugs, "The Shadow Earth should be a safe distance from the Dragon."

The three of us set off for Shadow Earth. Though I don't comment on it, I

can't help but notice that with Morgan and some of the others gone decisions seem a lot easier to reach.

Harlan says that, although he has never been to Godfrey's home, he has talked to him on Trumps. He explains that Godfrey is a cleric of some sort who lives in a palace with lots of cool paintings. I steer us toward Rome. On the way Pegs shows up with Rembrandt in tow. We mount up and Dennifer rides behind me. I've never thought of her as the maidenly type, but she seems to have the sidesaddle position down pat, and I like the feel of her arms around my waist.

I have Pegs (who can instinctively find people, places, and things in Shadow) take us to Godfrey. Not surprisingly we wind up at the Vatican, just outside the Library. It's not the kind of place where a horse with wings or a Greek God would be welcome so Pegs takes off somewhere with Rembrandt again.

We go into the Library. Its a magnificent place and reminds me of a certain Professor of Medieval Studies who used to launch into long diatribes about how much good one man, armed with a pick axe, could do for mankind if he could just get into the Library's sub-vaults for half an hour.

We begin to get a few stares, especially Dennifer, who is dressed in a Robin Hood-esque tunic and tights. Harlan suggests that it might be easier to locate Godfrey if we blended in a little more. We turn a corner and there is a hamper with three habits. We slip the loose fitting robes over our normal clothes. Even in the baggy robes Dennifer doesn't look much like a monk. I tease her about shaving a tonsure into the back of her head but she kicks me in the shin hard enough to make me lose interest in the joke. We look around for about ten more minutes but don't find Godfrey. 'Tisn't that surprising, the Bloody place is huge.

I'm beginning to get frustrated. Even if we don't know whether or not their use attracts the Dragon, I am willing to risk using a Trump. Harlan calls Godfrey who answers almost immediately.

He pulls us through to his quarters, which could certainly be described as palatial. The decadence is knee deep. The place is almost literally covered with priceless objects of art and artifacts, both historical and magical.

When he is done staring, Harlan asks Godfrey, "What kind of monk are you?"

Godfrey gives us a big egotistical grin and says, "I'm not a monk, I'm a leader."

He seems to be completely unaware of what's happening in Amber. No one has sought him out to warn him or to get his assistance. Says a lot about his popularity, eh? Godfrey's isolation is reassuring in a way though; at least we know that the destruction hasn't reached this far out. According to Godfrey the only untoward occurrence around here was an attack, which may or may not have been aimed at him, by a mysterious worm that smelled of strawberries. I'll give the devil his due though, once appraised of

the situation, Godfrey is ready, even eager, to abandon whatever it is he does here and come to Amber's aid.

Just as Godfrey finishes clearing up some business and we are ready to leave, Pegs shows up with Rembrandt and two other horses. We mount up and the four of us shadowride off into the sunset. It's funny but I never cease getting a kick out of that, no matter how many times I do it. Guess I'm just a romantic at heart.

The four of us stop for a rest in Minas Tirth, a place I remember from a book my father gave me when I was a kid. At an Inn just inside the great walls we have dinner and try to figure out who is trapped in Amber and who isn't. My father, Fiona, Flora, Gérard, Martin, Benedict, and Julian are known to be trapped. We know that Caine has contacted Morgan and is, therefore, free as is Bleys, who Dennifer helped out of a jam. We also know that Dworkin is both on the loose and acting more strangely than usual. So that leaves only Llewella unaccounted for.

Llewella is a friend, one of the few I have in Amber and I want to know what her status is so I risk trying her Trump, despite the fact that Harlan seems convinced that their use attracts the Black Dragon.

Nothing. No busy signal, no resistance, and no superheated backblast. I get the others to help. Harlan and Dennifer each touch her Card and we get a faint far away contact. The three of us coerce Godfrey into joining and it finally comes to life. The image we see is of a woman who looks older, more powerful, and much less vulnerable than the Llewella I know. She seems to be in a small car, possibly a Volkswagen Beetle, which is in the process of being disintegrated in a head on collision with a semi-truck. As our minds touch her eyes light up with hope and she reaches out to us. Instinctively I grab for her hand and pull. Godfrey who apparently thinks this is some sort of clever attack drops out of the contact to draw his sword. Her hand becomes insubstantial in my grasp, her image fades, and the card becomes lifeless.

"You Bloody Little Fuck," I scream at Godfrey, "you've killed her!"

He glares at me and I take a swing at him. Between my anger and his skill he side steps it easily. He returns to a ready stance, drawn sword at the en garde and smiles. Jesus, but I hate that Bloody smile.

Did I mention that Godfrey has the reputation for being the most deadly swordsman in our generation? Well he does, but at the moment I don't give a Bloody fuck, all I care about is wiping that smile off his face.

Harlan gives Dennifer a panicked look.

She shrugs and quietly says, "I want to see this."

I draw my own sword.

Godfrey's smile gets bigger, "My, my. The puppy has fangs!"

Just as the tips of our blades touch Morgan and Dameon appear in a burst of rainbow colors. Dameon immediately steps between us and demands an explanation. Funny, I thought keeping me out of trouble was Morgan's job. But in a complete reversal of roles he seems to be egging the clash on.

Dennifer quickly explains what happen and Morgan begins to rip into

Godfrey, who doesn't look quite so cocky as he did before. If there is anyone who could take Godfrey in a fight its probably Morgan. In a fair fight Morgan is considered second only to Godfrey. The only trouble there is that Morgan seldom fights fair.

Morgan ends up challenging Godfrey to a duel and after a lot of posturing and saber rattling the two of them agree to fight after the present crisis has passed.

Since Dennifer expressed a desire to see me cross swords with Godfrey it must have been Harlan who summoned Morgan. When the shouting is over I shoot him a stern glance. He gives me an apprehensive shrug. I reluctantly give him a smile and he nods back at me.

Morgan mumbles something about not being popular with the Stewards and suggests we leave at once. After another loud discussion he Trumps everyone back to Ygg. Most of us still haven't gotten any rest and when Pegs and Rembrandt show up we decide to take a nap and leave them on guard.

While I sleep I have another dream. I can see the Pattern, it floats inside the Dragon. The perspective of the dream changes and the Pattern becomes a wedge of the three-dimensional image inside the Dragon. The dream twist a third time and I spy the Unicorn. It is still in great danger. The lava is rising ever higher and its wee island of rock grows smaller and smaller.

I wake up in a cold sweat and decide to discuss my dream with Harlan. Dworkin is the family expert on both dreams and the Pattern and Harlan has lived and studied with him. Granted, he mostly just studied Trump, but I'm hoping something more has rubbed off. Unfortunately it didn't. He doesn't even have an opinion about the dream's meaning. Sometimes it almost seems like someone has affected his ability to think clearly.

He does have an interesting little tale to tell though. Apparently Morgan couldn't sleep and got up after the rest of us dozed off. Something woke up Harlan, probably Godfrey, because after Harlan rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he saw him following Morgan into the woods, so he decided to follow them both.

In the woods Morgan and Godfrey encountered a toothy and buxom young wench who turned out to be as dangerous as she was beautiful. The girl's voice was alluring, like a siren, and she lured Harlan out of hiding. She seemed to knows Morgan, and addressed him as 'Lord,'. She wanted to speak in private. But she showed more interest in Godfrey. What she wanted him for, however, isn't clear to Harlan. Many of her suggestions had sexual overtones, but Harlan can't make up his mind if she wanted to sleep with Godfrey or eat him. She had no interest in Harlan because he has no Pattern. When Morgan and Godfrey finally left she disappeared.

As he finishes the story Godfrey glares at Harlan who looks down at his feet and hurriedly explains, "That was the first time I was ever glad that I didn't have the Pattern."

As we talk Morgan comes over. He wants Harlan to make a Trump of

the Black Dragon. He has this theory that the entire business revolves around him somehow. He won't explain further except to say that he believes that someone or thing is trying to contact him through the Dragon.

Harlan frowns and tells Morgan that all of his supplies are back in Dworkin's cave. I think Morgan is nuts, but I want to see Harlan work. So I tell them that I have a sketch pad and a set of prismacolor pencils in Pegs' saddlebags. Harlan nods and says that he might be able to do something with those. I retrieve the pad and pencils and bring them to Harlan. He begins to sketch and Morgan smiles and walks off.

I watch Harlan work. His concentration is so intense that he doesn't even realize I'm looking over his shoulder. Though I am sure that Harlan would disagree, I have to say that I am clearly the better artist. But to call what Harlan is creating art is like calling Captain Joe's windjammer a boat. The image of the Dragon appears almost as if by magic. Trump Magic. Art has always been somewhat magical to me, but what Harlan does is fantastic. I've got to learn more!

Dameon interrupts my lesson when he taps me on the shoulder.

"Bloody Hell!" I try to back him down with a glare that always seems to work for Morgan, "Dameon. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"But you were just standing there," he protests as I start shoving him away, "this is important Carolan."

Harlan looks up from my pad and says, "Huh?"

Dameon grabs my hand and starts to drag me out of earshot of the others.

I give him a truly evil glare and add, "It had better be."

He looks back toward the camp, "I wanted to warn you about Morgan. The Dragon and Morgan are connected in a way I don't yet understand. Deirdre, my mother, warned me about them."

I shake my head and softly explain, "Dameon, your mother is dead."

His blue eyes narrow into an angry glare, "It was in a dream, dammit!" he replies angrily, "Besides my mother isn't dead. She was lost in the Abyss, and that is not necessarily the same thing!" He tosses his final words over his shoulder as he stomps off.

I stare at his back a moment and consider his words. He's probably right at that, it really 'tisn't the same thing at all. I hate all of this. There are too many hidden meanings, half-truths, and unexplained mysteries floating about to suit my tastes. I've never been good at dealing with Family intrigue, dreams, visions, and mystery women with too many teeth. I have always preferred to confront my problems in a more straight forward fashion. Unfortunately I'm convinced that it will take more than a lance through the heart to kill the Black Dragon.

By the time I walk back to camp a loud discussion has started. I look at Morgan and Dameon and frown. Dennifer catches my eye, shrugs, and smiles. Her smile is like the gentle touch of sunshine as it temporarily breaks though the clouds on an overcast day.

The yelling stops for a moment as Morgan pulls another of his mysterious Trumps from up his sleeve and announces that he is leaving. This one depicts a crimson desert.

Godfrey refuses to go. Morgan glares at him. Finally he shrugs and walks over to me and in a low voice asks that I stay behind and keep an eye on Godfrey. I nod my head rather sullenly. I hate it when he treats me like a baby, but this time I can't tell if he really wants Godfrey watched or if he thinks this red desert might be dangerous and wants to leave me behind.

Dennifer gives me a smile and a wink as they disappear in a spray of color.

I pick up my sketch book where Harlan dropped it. The half finished Trump of the Dragon is still there. When things have quieted down I intend to study it some more.

I suggest to Godfrey that we still have not determined the fate of all our parents and that the Trumps seem safe enough for us to try and contact them.

Godfrey isn't interested, "I know my father's fate. He's dead!" he pouts. Though you couldn't tell it from his pale blonde hair, Godfrey's father is Eric.

Bloody Hell! Godfrey is even more worthless than Harlan. Harlan may be timid and afraid of making mistakes and therefore has to be prodded into action, but at least he tries. Godfrey is nothing more than a bully and an unthinking one at that.

"If you're afraid, then don't help," I challenge him.

"I you think I'm afraid of our Uncles then you are mistaken," he glares.

If that is not false bravado, then Godfrey is even dumber than I gave him credit for. Most of my Uncles Bloody well scare the Hell out of me and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

I shuffle through my Trump deck, and with Godfrey's help, try to make contact with whatever card comes up on top while ignoring any that feel warm. I try Oberon but the card is dead like always. Next I turn over Corwin's Trump but there is no response. The third card shuffled to the top belongs to Eric. It feels the same as Oberon's. Next I turn over Deirdre; her card does not feel like Oberon's or Eric's but is just as unresponsive. Then I flip up Caine. As I concentrate the card comes to life.

I can't tell which of us is more surprised, me or Caine. Caine clearly recovers more quickly because he pushes something he doesn't want me to see beneath a pile of loose papers.

"Carolan is that you?" he asks with just a touch of surprise in his voice.

I have always thought that his peculiar mustache and beard give Caine a devilish look at the best of times. But when his eyes narrow, like they're doing now, and he glares at you, his face becomes downright satanic.

He suddenly smiles, "Ah, I see. You have Godfrey with you, don't you? And is that Ygg I see in the background?"

I have always been leery of my Uncle Caine. It would be easy to dismiss

him as evil but I know that to do so would be an over simplification. That wouldn't do either of us any justice. He exists on levels of complexity that are completely beyond me, and I have difficulty trusting someone whose motives I can't even fathom.

We make polite conversation until he feels that he has me completely off guard and then he pounces, "With whom do you stand?" he demands.

I blink several times at the abruptness of his question then answer, "With Amber."

His eyes almost twinkle when he replies, "As do we all." He gives me a soft seductive grin instead of his usual sharp smile, "But to who are you loyal?"

"The Pattern." I am trying not to give him whatever information it is that he wants but I also realize that in this sort of game I'm way out of my league. He smiles, nods, and begins cleaning his nails with a stiletto.

We spar back and forth for longer than I'd have thought I could manage. Caine doesn't usually make small talk, so I know that he is pumping me in clever ways I can't anticipate. Still, I have no idea what to do about it. I hate the idea of letting him use me, but, as I've already said, I am not very good at the games my Family loves so much while Caine is a Master. I wish Fi were here, she loves this kind of stuff and is actually good at it.

Caine explains that the Family is taking sides in a very dangerous new game.

"On who's side will you play, boys?" he asks.

My loyalties are to Amber and to Dad. But to put an end to a conversation that I am losing badly I reply, "On your side, Uncle. If you wish."

He puts down the stiletto and smiles. His hand pops through the Trump and he says, "then come on down."

As our wooded vale disappears in the whirling colors that accompany a Trump passage I can't help but think how much he sounds like that guy on television.

> *"When you say you agree to a thing in principal, you mean that you have not the slightest intention of carrying it out in practice."*
>
> *– Prince Otto von Bismark*

Caine pulls us through and we find ourselves in a sprawling medieval town that looks to be from the middle Tudor period. I love medieval settings but have always hated the squalor and hopelessness that collects in the big cities of the period. A slum is a slum no matter what the age, but I have always found something especially pathetic about medieval ones. Maybe it is because they detract from the romance and high adventure I want from such places.

Caine leads us down a street. The stench is far worse that I would have expected even for a world without plumbing. I hear a splash and an oath

from Godfrey and smile to myself. Like I said I've lived in places without plumbing and have therefore been careful not to walk in the middle of the street. Godfrey however seems to have spent too much time in the Vatican; he has sunk to his ankles in sewage.

I smile and say, "Not in the middle and not too near the overhangs on the second floors. This isn't Amber you know."

He glares at the brown stains on both legs of his white pants, "If they've got open sewage then what the Hell's in the sewers?"

Until he pointed them out I hadn't really noticed them. Probably because I wasn't expecting any. I can almost hear Fiona scolding me now, 'In Shadow, always expect the unexpected, Cory.'

As we stride behind Caine we try to get a look in the sewers. Turns out they contain lava or something molten. No wonder the stench in this place is so bad.

Godfrey steps a little closer and whispers, "Brimstone?"

I shrug, "You're the expert. But whatever it is there's sulfur in it."

I've had a strange feeling about this place ever since we stepped into the street, like something isn't right.

I guess Godfrey must have felt it too because he turns to me and whispers, "Something is off here."

I try to manipulate a bit of Shadow stuff, "The Pattern doesn't feel right."

Godfrey gives me a nod of understanding and almost together we whisper, "Chaos!"

Caine stops in front of a particularly ramshackle looking structure, fiddles with the door and goes inside. Even though I am beginning to wonder what we've gotten ourselves into, I follow him. Godfrey is barely a step behind me.

Caine has cut a spy-eye into the wall of a little hidey-hole of a room barely big enough for the three of us to move about in. He gestures for both Godfrey and myself to take a peek. On the other side of the wall are two people who could be Bleys and Merlin and several individuals who could only be Lords of Chaos.

We have come in on the middle of a conversation, but they seem to be plotting against Amber and the Pattern. A long-legged sinuous looking woman with red colored skin and a tail, that swings from side to side as she talks, wants to save what remains of reality by disengaging Chaos from the 'infection' of the Pattern. This sounds good in theory but the word 'eradication' comes up far too often for my taste.

The big redheaded man nods several times while she speaks. He turns to the others and spreads out what looks like a parchment map. Two things happen as he does; first, a 3D blue-green holo-image of the Black Dragon appears; and second, I see his face clearly for the first time.

It is Bleys; it has to be. He still has the gash on his forehead that Dennifer described seeing him with yesterday. Despite the evidence of my own eyes I refuse to believe that Bleys would become involved in a

conspiracy with Lords of Chaos against the Pattern, let alone seek it's eradication. Didn't he turn on Brand for wanting to do the very same thing?

He turns to the image of the Dragon, "We need to places our forces here, here, and here..."

The beautiful red woman raises her right hand and says, "Hold!" She turns on our peephole, points, and hisses, "Spies."

Caine back peddles out of the room with Godfrey right on his heels. I stand my ground primarily because I'm hoping to see if the black haired man with his back to me is really Merlin.

He is.

I start to back peddle myself.

Waiting turns out to be a mistake. I am only as far as the alley when Bleys crashes through the wall. Sweet Jesus! I know it was little more than a shack but he ran right through the Bloody wall!

Perhaps I have been guilty of overestimating my own prowess in the past but I have never underestimated one of my uncles. When Bleys crashed though that wall I was worried. Worried hell, I was scared shitless. Scared enough to waste several more seconds by trying to Trump Merlin, though I have no idea what I expected him to do.

Bleys draws his sword and I barely get mine out in time to parry his opening blow. I try a stop thrust that is totally ineffective and leaves me in a position from which I barely recover. He telegraphs a high slash, which I ignore, feints low then slips into a lunge at the last second. I side step to the left in an attempt to avoid his oncoming blade but the point tears though my tights and breaks the skin of my right thigh. First blood, I think. This is as far as I've ever gotten with an elder. Our eyes meet and he smiles. I feint a low lunge and slash at his face. He makes a sweeping parry that slips into a big elaborate slash that looks flashy as Hell but is easy to parry and leaves him wide open at its finish. I slash into the opening he leaves. He side steps and uses an awkward looking parry that leaves his blade perpendicular to the ground. I lunge and with blinding speed his point rises to met my own. As our weapons come together he twists his blade in a spiral move that causes my sword to slide along his until we are corps-a-corps.

He smiles again and explains, "I usually don't give that move away for free." Then physically pushes me away from him.

I telegraph a lunge to his left leg, a slash to his right and I throw everything I have into a furious slashing attack to his face and upper body that leaves me wide open to attack. I think the audacity of the move startles him. At any rate, it forces him onto the defensive long enough for me to recover and get back into a defensive position. He begins to press me. Soon I find that I am in a totally defensive position. But even that is not enough. It becomes more and more obvious that my skills are no match for his own.

This knowledge, which should have terrified me, makes me angry instead. My anger makes me bold. I go back on the offensive. He smiles again and steps forward to receive my attack. I set him up for a furious

slashing attack and at the last minute drop into a lunge. He must not have expected me to sacrifice my own body to get inside his guard. He is forced to twist in order to avoid my blade and his sword only slashes my side instead of piercing it. There is blood on his wrist, however. I smile triumphantly and Bleys salutes me.

Bleys' sword work is blindly quick, and our entire exchange takes place in the few seconds it takes the red-hued woman to run into the alley. She immediately spies Godfrey, who has drawn his own sword, and begins to conjure. When she gestures in his direction, Godfrey, pulls out a cross with his left hand and points it in her direction.

She laughs, "Do you think I'm a vampire, fool?"

The cross emits a harsh glaring light that is the same color as the sparks that fly from the Pattern when you walk it. As the Pattern light touches her the woman shrieks in agony and collapses to the ground. Both her clothes and her skin seem to fall from her body wherever it has been touched by the deadly light. You can clearly see muscle, bone, and organs underneath the ugly wounds but she does not bleed. Instead the edges of each injury begin to burn until she seems to be consumed in electric blue flames. She wails mournfully and dies. I've read Corwin's accounts of the Patternfall War but this is the first time I've actually seen the death of a Lord of Chaos. What a horrible ghastly way to die. I don't think I will ever forget it. I find I cannot tear my eyes away from the body as the eerie blue flames consume it. Apparently neither can Bleys. Our own fight is all but forgotten.

Godfrey who is most likely the only one of us not stunned by what has just transpired grabs me and Trumps us out of there.

When our feet touch solid stone I turn on Godfrey and demand, "Bloody Christ man, couldn't you have just run her through cleanly?"

He shrugs, "She was using magic. I needed a ranged attack. Besides she was just a Lord of Chaos, what's the big deal?"

I glare at him a moment while trying to rein in my temper. He may have just saved my life. But the more I think about it, the more convinced I become that Bleys did not want to kill me. If he had I think I would be dead.

I look around. We seem to be in a castle. Finally I sigh in resignation and in a much calmer voice ask, "Where are we?"

"In Gwyndon, a Shadow I know."

"How close to Amber are we?"

A look of concern comes over his face and Godfrey rushes to the window and looks out. "Far enough that we should be okay for awhile."

"Thanks for not leaving me back there."

He looks almost embarrassed by my expression of gratitude. Mumbles something about getting some bandages and leaves.

By now most of my adrenaline high has drained away and the let-down leaves me light headed. I collapse onto the edge of an over stuffed bed and put my head between my legs. After a minute I feel much better. I take my

Trumps of Merlin and Bleys from my deck and stare at them a minute without activating them.

I know very little about Merlin besides the fact that he is young like me and Dennifer, is Corwin's son, and that he was born in the Courts of Chaos. They say he has mastered the Logrus, the Courts version of the Pattern, and is a Trump Artist like Harlan. For some reason I want to trust Merlin. Maybe because it would be nice to have a male friend my own age. Everyone in Amber is hundreds of years older than me.

My Uncle Bleys, on the other hand, reminds me of Fiona and has always been good to me. When I was in Amber he was usually too busy for 'kid's stuff', but when he wasn't he knew how to have a good time. In that he reminds me of Dad. I could never say that we are friends but he can be fun. Please don't get the wrong impression of Bleys though. He is the equal of Corwin in the arts of war, if not his superior; as well as a student of the Pattern and the magical arts like his sister Fiona and his brother Brand. All in all he deserves respect and can be a dangerous foe, as I just found out.

I refuse to believe that Bleys, or Merlin for that matter, are traitors. Besides, unlike Godfrey, I am convinced that the Dragon can only be defeated with the help of the Courts. Help that apparently can only be gotten through Bleys or Merlin. I make up my mind to try and contact Merlin one more time. I concentrate on his card and it leaps to life. Even before I say 'Hello' Merlin seizes my mind.

Bloody wonderful! This is just what my already bruised ego needed. Inadequate physically and now psychically as well. This is just not my day!

I hear Godfrey yelling my name as my vision is filled with a rainbow of color and my awareness slips away from Gwyndon Castle.

The first thing I become aware of is a shimmering violet sky, the second is blood from my side running down the leg of a hard wood chair, the third is Merlin screaming that I murdered the Baroness.

"I had nothing to do with it," I explain in what I hope is a calm voice, "You were there, you saw the whole thing, 'Twas Godfrey's doing! I swear it by the Unicorn's horn, I wasn't even able defend myself from Bleys let alone kill anybody!"

He doesn't buy it. He says that I was Godfrey's accomplice and, in the eyes of the law, as guilty as he is. I point out to him that if guilt by association brings in a conviction in the Courts then he might as well hang the entire family, himself included. I tell him that I was horrified by what Godfrey did and that we were both the unwilling dupes of Caine.

"What's this," he laughs, "ratting out your friends already. I guess its true what they say about honor and thieves and such."

My eyes narrow and my voice takes on a hard edge, "Caine is not my friend, he's my Uncle, a distinction that should be quite clear to you. I take pride in being nothing like him. And who the Bloody Fuck do you think you are to lecture me about honor? You're the turncoat plotting to eradicate the

Pattern."

If I'd struck him in the face he couldn't have been more surprised and a half audible, "Huh?" seems to be all he can manage.

He stares at me awhile, finally the dumbfounded look leaves his face and says, "We were planning to 'eradicate' the Dragon.

"I know I've a reputation for naivety but you must take me for a complete fool as well. I heard you, damnit!"

"Then you must have only heard part of what we said, but that doesn't matter, I'm not the one on trial here."

Since I've managed to put him on the defensive I decide to go for broke, "You have no authority to pass judgement on me!"

"A Lord of Chaos is dead!" he yells while leaping to his feet.

"I am innocent of her death." I say it calmly, in a matter-of-fact tone meant to defuse his anger.

He paces around the room several times. He stops directly in front of me. "There's a way to prove your innocence or guilt, right here, right now," he explains in a calm voice.

"How?"

"You can prove the sincerity of your words by letting me into you mind." Christ Jesus! I may be naive but even I realize what he's asking. Once he is inside my mind my memories will prove the truth of my words, but I will be totally vulnerable.

"Why should I trust you enough to put myself completely at your mercy?"

"Because you have no other options."

He has a point. Besides the more time we spend fighting with each other the greater the Unicorn's danger becomes.

"Alright, go ahead then."

He smiles and the last thing I remember is flashing him a defiant look.

I wake up naked and in bed. Not only am I still alive but my wounds have been healed and I appear to be in complete control of my faculties. Of course I've no way of telling which, if any, of my memories they've adjusted or what sort of hidden commands or thoughts Merlin or who knows which Lords of Chaos may have implanted in my helpless mind.

Bloody Hell! Listen to me, eh? Am I becoming paranoid or what? Besides what good is worrying about such things going to do. If they did them then they are done, and now beyond my control, case closed.

Well the view out my window is certainly magnificent. I slide out of bed and walk to window to get a better look. We seem to be on the edge of a chasm. I stick my head out the window so I can look up as well as down. I seem to be in a castle or keep, located halfway up one side of a Great Canyon and carved directly from the living rock. Far below us a mighty river rages. There are shades of brown, red, and purple everywhere but the tone and variation of the colors are spectacularly unearthly. The canyon is like

nothing I have ever seen and the architecture of the Keep seems almost non-euclidian, like something out of an M.C. Escher print. We can only be in the Courts. I would never have guessed that Chaos could be so fascinating. Maybe it isn't all like this, but our present location is breathtaking, if disorientating.

I look in the mirror, my face looks back at me exactly as it always has. There is no use worrying about what they may or may not have done, I tell myself. Look, you have never been to the Courts; so why not sit back and enjoy both the exotic scenery and the company, if there is going to be any.

I yank on the bell cord and then sit on the bed's edge and flip the sheet across my groin and upper thighs. A beautiful teenage girl in an erotically short skirt made of some sort of animal hide, like buckskin appears. She has big dark eyes, long straight black hair, and appears to be an American Indian/Polynesian mix. I ask for some clothes.

She stares at me with big curious eyes for a minute then curtseys and says, "Yes, Lord. Of course Lord."

Whoever my host is he or she seems to have excellent taste. If this maid is any indication, the women here match the scenery perfectly. The girl's curiosity is amusing, from the way she stared I can only guess that she knows who I am and has never seen a Prince of Amber before.

A few minutes later Merlin walks in with a woman who, despite being Flora's exact opposite in coloration, is her rival for pure physical beauty. She has a pleasant expression and a beautiful smile but you can't look at her face without being draw into her startlingly blue eyes. It's funny but the fact that she has Flora's eyes makes the contrasts between the two women more dramatic, not less. If Flora were the Pattern then this woman would surely be the Logrus.

She has the dark sultry beauty of the tropics and looking at her makes me homesick. Change those intoxicating eyes to green and she could easily be my mother's sister. She is a few inches shorter than my mother and a bit fuller of figure, but they both have manes of wavy raven colored tresses, nut brown complexions, and long curvaceous legs.

She is dressed in a simple cream colored dress made of a soft clingy material that is pulled tight in all the right places by pink ribbon. She wears no makeup, jewelry, or other adornments. In her arms she is carrying a green bundle. My clothes, obviously.

I smile at Merlin and ask, "Satisfied?"

He nods and returns my smile.

I look toward his companion and our eyes make contact. Her's sparkle and dance, giving the impression of a person who is in love with life.

"I never would have imagined that the Courts could be so beautiful," I observe.

"Do you like the view?" he asks in an almost pleased tone.

"'Tis breathtaking," I confess without taking my eyes off the lady, who nods her head slightly in my direction as if to acknowledge my

compliment.

"I was inspired by the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert, have you ever been to either?"

I shake my head, "Except for California, I never got out West. Is this a shadow of your creation, then?"

"These lands are part of my Ways."

The lady holds out her bundle, "You asked for clothes. I hope these fit."

She flashes a dazzling smile but makes no move to approach me.

I have never been overly self-conscious about my body, in fact I'm quite proud of it. I have enough hair on my chest to look virile without being hairy and just enough muscle on my five foot eleven and a half inch fame not to appear skinny or overly bulky. I have never been insecure about any part of my anatomy and have always considered myself physically attractive to the opposite sex.

I know what your thinking, but I challenge you to name me one Prince of Amber who is humble?

At any rate, this hauntingly beautiful woman seems to be daring me to retrieve the bundle of clothes; and I rarely back down from a dare.

Merlin's eyes widen when I stand up. He glances over to the woman and then back to me as I begin to walk toward her. He seems more scandalized than concerned though.

The woman gives me a sly little grin and says, "So you are Carolan. Merlin has told me all about you but I wanted to see you for myself."

I hold up my arms and give her a good look. Merlin's eyes roll back in his head. He is definitely not happy about something. I reach the woman and hold out my hands palms up. She grins and sets the package in them. I break the twine that holds the package together and begin to dress. The fit on each garment is perfect and I tell her so.

She nods and smiles. Her smiles can be as enticing as the most accomplished coquette's, but with none of the usual loss of genuineness.

When I am properly dressed Merlin turns to me and says, "This is Meriad," his words are the first indication I have had that the woman is anything more than a servant.

"That is a fascinating birthmark on your shoulder," she observes.

She is referring to the harp shaped birthmark which is actually located on the upper part of my left shoulder blade not my shoulder at all.

"I am told that you are an accomplished harpist. Perhaps someday you will play for me?"

"If I but had a harp, milady, I would gladly do so now."

She makes a motion with her hands, that seems little more than a wave, and summons a power which may be either the Logrus or magic. I am pretty much unfamiliar with either, but suddenly a harp appears. It is intricately crafted and carved with head of a demon. I run through the scale. Then turn to her and say, "A magnificent instrument. The work of a true master. I would be honored to play it for you."

She turns to Merlin and smiles, she obviously has the sort of mouth that smiles easily and often. "Be a darling and see about having some refreshments brought to the veranda, would you?"

Merlin nods and leaves the room. I am too busy admiring the master craftsmanship that went into the harp's creation to notice that he backs out.

Meriad leads me to the veranda. The view is even more spectacular from the outside and quite a bit more disorienting as well. Without the rectangular walls of the Keep's rooms to act as a point of reference it quickly becomes difficult to distinguish up from down. At times the roaring river seems to be above and the sky below. Once I come to the realization that it is best to simply accept the view and enjoy it I begin to lose some of my disorientation. One can't help but admire Merlin's skill at shaping this place.

"The view is quite magnificent isn't it," she observes from over my shoulder.

I turn to face her and nod, "But it pales in comparison to you."

She smiles, "This is your first visit to the Courts is it not?"

I nod. "It is absolutely breathtaking. Nothing at all like I expected."

She laughs, "You must visit us more often. Too much order, like too much work, makes Carolan a dull boy." Her laugh is musical and as genuine as her smile. After spending so much time with my family this strange Chaos woman's honesty is refreshing.

I give her one of my best boyishly sexy smiles, "Is that an invitation?"

She gives me a coy smile in return, "You may consider it as such, yes."

She reaches into a pocket in her dress and withdraws a Trump. Instead of the Unicorn on Green it's back is covered by small red and black squares. The front depicts Meriad in what I assume are riding clothes.

"You can use this."

I am still trying to sort out in my mind what her invitation may or may not include when Merlin returns with a bottle of wine in each hand and two maids, each of whom are lovelier than the one I encountered earlier. They are carrying trays of exotic fruits, cheeses, various breads, dips, and spreads.

The three of us snack on the fruit and cheese and make small talk. I get the impression that Meriad is the sort who would prefer running barefoot through wild flowers than be queen of some formal ball. She is so unimposing and down-to-earth that it is hard to imagine her commanding anything other than a man's heart.

Though the lady seems to be enjoying the pleasantries, Merlin seems unhappy. I can usually catch him frowning whenever our playful flirting begins to take on stronger sexual overtones. It occurs to me that I have made little or no effort to determine what Merlin's feelings for the lady are. At first I thought she was another of the beautiful household staff but I can clearly see now, that this is not the case. By the Unicorn! I hope they're not lovers. I don't intentionally poach on cousins. I resolve to get Merlin alone

as soon as possible and ask him what if anything is going on there.

When the food and most of the wine is gone Meriad wants me to play. I begin with a traditional medieval lay but her beauty and the incredible scenery inspire me to begin improvising wild haunting melodies. In the past my approach to the harp has always been traditional, I usually do most of my experimenting on the piano, but out here on the edge of Reality that sort of sound hardly seems adequate. This mysterious Lady of Chaos that I know so little about has inspired me to break away from traditional orderly thinking and try something wild and free. The result is very beautiful, if I do say so myself.

When I finish she claps her hands and cries, "Bravo, Bravo."

I bow to her and then to Merlin.

She rises, "Thank you for the song Carolan of Amber. I would really love to stay and hear more but alas I have pressing business that I really must attend to."

Merlin stands. She turns to him, "Please see that Carolan gets a copy of the Trump you made of my Ways." She turns back to me, "We have cleared you of all complicity in Madalga's death. In the future you will have nothing to fear from Chanicut."

She summons an eerie power effect, that can only be the Logrus, and is gone. A second or two later she reappears or at least her head and shoulders do.

"You may keep the harp if you like."

"Thank you, it is a magnificent gift."

She dismisses my gratitude with a wave of a hand and disappears again.

I watch the spot where she stood only a moment ago while trying to come down from the high her presence and the wild wonderful music have induced in me.

I look over to Merlin and ask, "You and her aren't," he gives me a dumbstruck look of disbelief, "sleeping together or anything, are you?"

Merlin shakes his head, crosses to me, lays one hand on my shoulder, and in a conspiratorial tone asks, "You have no idea who that was, do you?"

"One very special lady," I answer.

"You got that right. That was the Queen."

"Of what?" I ask with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

He shrugs, "Just of everything this side of Ygg."

I shallow hard, "She's **the** Queen?"

He smiles and nods, "Of the whole ball of wax!"

It's fascinating how time works or doesn't work for Amberites, 'tisn't it? Only a short while ago I was about to die horribly, my innards spread all over a medieval alley and then, next thing I know, I am lunching with one of the most beautiful and powerful women in all reality. My morning was filled with the stench of death, brimstone, and medieval sewage and my

afternoon consisted of scented breezes, harp music, and polite conversation with a beautiful exotic woman. Ain't the power to control reality Bloody wonderful!

Merlin has finally accepted me as an ally, despite what he apparently considers my inappropriate behavior with the Queen. Well, I should Bloody well hope so, after poking around in my head like that he probably knows my innermost secrets better than I do. He tells me that Bleys, himself, and the other Lords of Chaos were planning to attack the Dragon not the Pattern. They hope a strong physical attack can weaken it enough to prevent it from devouring any more Shadows. I'm still confused about what happened but I am beginning to fell like I've been set up. I trusted Caine, 'tis a mistake I'll not make again.

I learn some interesting facts from Merlin as well. First, that his mother Dara is missing. Second, that they have been unable to establish contact with Llewella, Dworkin, or Oberon. I always find it unsettling when living people, like Merlin, refer to dead people, like Oberon, as though they were not, dead that is. It always make me wonder what they know that I don't.

He also tells me that the Dragon is actually a very complex Pattern, that Caine can spy on people by using their Trumps, and that in the Courts Dworkin's name is Adoran.

I think I'm beginning to like Merlin and that's bad. It violates rule number one, which is: *Never like a family member and never trust anyone with the Blood.*

I shrug to myself, 'I've never been much good with rule number one, anyway.'

We decide to round up Morgan and the others by Trump and bring them here to Merlin Ways.

Bleys was planning to attack the Dragon by attacking the Shadows that are reflections of the Pattern within it. But, based on info he has gleaned from my head, Merlin is no longer sure that such a thing is even possible, let alone worth pursuing. While he goes off to talk to Bleys I try contacting Morgan, Gwynt, Dennifer and the others.

Eventually I round them all up. Godfrey is in the Courts, fighting a duel with a Lord, probably a relative of Madalga. Gwynt, Derek, and Dameon are walking along an asphalt road. Morgan and Harlan are with Dennifer, who seems to have found a beach to replace the one she lost when the Dragon ate Cabra.

It is good to see Dennifer's smile.

Hell, it's even good to see Morgan's reproachful scowl.

"To overcome evil with good is good, to resist evil by evil is evil."

– Mohammed

Morgan begins to scold me but is interrupted by the Dynamic Duo, who want to go out to the Abyss. Almost immediately an angry discussion starts. I've begun to notice that this seems to happen whenever Morgan, Derek, and Dameon get together. I can understand Dameon's interest in the Abyss, his mother is in there, but I'm not sure why Derek seems so anxious to butt heads with Morgan. Must be rutting season or something.

Merlin steps in and explains that while we are indeed in the Courts, we are not all that close to the Abyss. He suggests that it would be better to wait until morning and head up there when we are all fresh.

Dennifer complains that she has a headache and wouldn't mind laying down.

I know exactly how she feels, these *discussions* always give me a headache too.

Finally everyone agrees that they could probably use some rest and Merlin offers the lot of us the hospitality of his Keep.

We adjourn to a common room and the three beautiful serving girls I met earlier bring us food.

Derek makes a pass at the youngest, the one with all the curiosity about Amberites. But she apparently has more good taste than curiosity because she ignores his crude advances.

Merlin gets a Trump Call which Dameon tries to eavesdrop on; but when Merlin gives him an angry look he backs off. After finishing the Call Merlin explains that he has to leave but that he will be back in plenty of time to take us out to the Abyss in the morning.

Not long after he is gone Gwynt gets restless and announces his intention to take a walk.

I tell him that I don't think that it's a very good idea to wander off, that this is the Courts and nothing like what we're used to.

He shrugs and walks out of the room.

Hey, he's supposed to be my babysitter, not vice versa. I tried to warn him that it was a little strange out there. He didn't listen. If he gets lost or into trouble now it's his own Bloody fault.

Harlan suggests, to those of us who remain, that we try to learn what we can from our tarot decks. Godfrey doesn't think much of the idea and gives Harlan one of those condescending looks of his. Dennifer and Derek both think it's a fine idea and before I know it everybody, even Godfrey, is doing Trump readings.

Godfrey deals the Pyramid Spread and mumbles something about seeing, "Dire things in our futures."

Dennifer begins to deal out a traditional Celtic Spread.

Morgan seems to be doing nothing more than cutting his deck but he

studies each card carefully for some minutes after each cut.

Derek finds an empty spot on the floor and starts to shuffle one of those elaborate spreads that uses the entire deck.

I'm not in the mood for any more cryptic messages or warnings, but I don't want to look uncooperative so I take out my deck and deal a hand of solitaire.

Harlan wanders by and asks me, "What spread is that?"

"Canfield," I explain.

Derek flips over the last card in his monster spread and disappears in a eruption of rainbow hues.

Harlan rushes over to Derek's spread and picks up the card Derek dropped. His whisper is barely audible but we can all see it is a card of Brand.

Morgan and Dameon start to discuss what we should do about Derek.

I shake my head and turn back to my game.

"Knight of Cups on the Queen of Swords."

I look up, Dennifer is standing behind me, "What do you think Caine inverted in the position of opposition means, Cory?"

"Don't ever trust Caine, Denna. I did and it was a mistake."

"But if Caine's normal aspect is of one who cannot be trusted, then wouldn't Caine inverted indicate that he can be trusted?"

I scoop my cards into a pile, "I wouldn't trust these too much, either." She frowns, "Perhaps you're right. Sometimes I think they only tell you what you already know."

There is a cloud of color around Harlan and Derek reappears.

"It's Brand!" he shouts, "My Father and the others are the captives of Brand." He rants on for awhile about the Dragon being a servant of Brand, but none of what he says makes any sense and he is interrupted by the return of Gwynt and Morgan (I hadn't noticed that he'd left), who also seem to have used Harlan as a beacon for their safe return. Of course, nothing has made any sense for days now.

Eventually Dameon gets Derek calmed down and we all retire.

I have the same room as I had this morning. Gwynt stops by and tells me about his walk. He was running along minding his own business when everything just folded in on itself and changed. He describes it as being like running into the spine of a book, then crashing though the cover and into an entirely different book.

He met a guy on a horse who wanted to fight him. Not wanting to make trouble for Merlin, Gwynt tried to leave, but the guy kept putting obstacles in his way. This guy acted like he knew Gwynt, even though Gwynt is sure he'd never seen him before. Still, the guy insisted they fight a duel over some past discretion. Gwynt stopped to bind the wounds he incurred while bouncing off walls and falling down mountains and contacted Morgan.

Morgan listened to his tale then pulled out an energy rifle and blasted the guy, who fell apart right before Gwynt's eyes. When the pieces hit the

ground they began to burn. Gwynt still seems upset by this.

"You didn't think Morgan was going to fight fair did you?"

He shakes his head, "It was just such an ugly way to die."

"Morgan's rifle must have the Pattern in it like Godfrey's cross."

He asks about the cross and I tell him about my encounter with Caine, Bleys, and the Chaos woman, Madalga. By then we are both kind of bummed and he leaves.

I toss and turn a lot that night. There seem to be too many thoughts racing though my head to let me relax, let alone get any sleep.

I close my eyes and see Dennifer. She is at the Beach in Cabra, the one the Dragon devoured, and is lying on her stomach and has her bikini top off. The white sand begins to swirl around her until it blinds me. When it finally clears Dennifer has been replaced by Caine standing on his head.

I try turning on my side, but all it does is shift my chaotic thought patterns to Gwynt. He is running through books at super speed. He leaves a hole in each book that he passes though. I flip around on my back and can see my father, Fiona, and the others. They are trapped in Trumps. Brand holds them out like a poker hand. He smiles evilly and says, "Full House, Kings and Queens."

I get up and go to the bathroom. When I crawl back into bed I try counting sheep. But after only six or seven little lambs, the sheep become my hopes, secrets, and fears. And it is Merlin, not myself, who is doing the counting.

I roll over on my stomach and see Meriad. I try to remember the sound of her laughter, but my thoughts keep drifting in more carnal directions. What would it be like, I wonder, to make love to a woman from Chaos. Are they like other women? Do they all have tails? Are they as wild and uninhibited as their natures would seem to indicate? What would it be like to hold the Queen of Disorder in my arms. It is during these rather pleasant speculations about exotic women that I eventually drift off to sleep.

Unlike my waking thoughts, that are a clamor of mental noise, my sleep is quiet and dream free. I awaken the next morning rested, if not refreshed.

Merlin's beautiful Indian maiden servants serve a breakfast that is marred by very little discussion. But that might only be because Morgan got to the table late. After breakfast Merlin takes us out to the Abyss. The rest of us hang back and let Dameon approach first. He walks to the very edge bends over so that his hands rest on his knees and looks down. We give him some time alone with his thoughts. Dennifer, myself, Gwynt, and Merlin get in between Morgan and Derek and so ensure a few moments of silence.

Eventually we all wander over to the edge and take a look. Dennifer puts her arms around Dameon and nobody says anything for awhile.

Looking into the Abyss is eerie. I thought it would be like looking into a bottomless pit but it's not, 'tis more like looking at the Universe before the

Big Bang, or whatever act of creation you choose to believe in.

It is like looking at, "The Dragon!"

Though I did not mean to, I must have blurted it out loud because when I look back up nearly everyone is looking at me.

"Looking into the Abyss is like looking at the Dragon. It's not a great Bloody hole it's a void. It doesn't go on forever because there is nothing there. It's like space, infinite nothing. Vast emptiness."

"Shouldn't it be hot then." challenges Harlan.

I glare at him, but for a change he stands his ground, I'm just not as good at that sort of intimidation as Morgan.

"The Dragon is hot" he insists.

"Maybe it's only hot at the bottom."

"But you just said it didn't..."

"You're wrong!" We both look in the direction of Dameon's voice. He's looking directly at me. His face is an emotionless mask. "It's not empty. My mother is in there with that bastard Brand and I'll prove it to you."

He takes out his mother's Trump and begins to concentrate. Suddenly the life comes back into his eyes and he smiles. "She's here!" he shouts, "I can feel her!"

Dennifer slips her arm around his shoulder again and whispers something in his ear. He glares at her and pushes her away, "I'm telling you I could feel her. Come on everybody help me!" None of us, even those who are convinced his delusion is the product of wishful thinking, is a big enough ass to refuse him.

I turn to Godfrey, "This time you stay out."

"Fine," he reaches behind his back and withdraws a bow and three silver tipped arrows, "I made these up last night just in case of something like this. You pull her out and I'll be ready in case Brand tries to hitch a ride."

I lower my voice so Dameon can't hear me, "Do you actually think they're still alive in there?"

He shrugs, "You know Hamlet?" I nod. "I don't remember the exact line but I think the one about there being more than is dreamed of in Horatio's philosophy applies."

I nod and go over to the others. Dameon holds out the Trump of his mother and each of us in turn touches a part of it and pours in our psyche. When I touch the card I get the sense of someone being there. I didn't come to Amber until after the Patternfall War, so I never knew Deirdre. I can't tell if what I'm feeling is her or something else.

I hear Morgan whisper in my mind, 'This is very weird, it actually feels like her.'

The last one to touch the card is Harlan. He waited until last because he was directing the rest of us in how to link our minds together. I've told you that Harlan is Pattern blind but I don't think I've mentioned that he compensates for this with one of the most powerful minds in our Family.

As soon as his psyche begins to pour into the contact Deirdre's card swirls and comes to life.

Sweet Bloody Jesus, she's alive! Dameon was right, his mother's alive.

Dameon reaches for her hand, 'No!' screams Deirdre, 'I'm not alone!'

Harlan explains that Brand has somehow woven their Trump images together so that it will be impossible to pull Deirdre out without also retrieving him.

I inform the other's, 'We've got this covered.' I look over to Dameon and explain, 'When I give the signal yank her out,' but I can tell from the look of hatred on his face and the fact that he is pulling a sword that he has other ideas.

I yell aloud to Godfrey, "Get ready he's coming out."

I stretch out my hand to Deirdre but she won't take it. I grab hold of her wrist and pull with all my strength. The next few seconds are total chaos, but as far as I can reconstruct them, this is what happened. Deirdre falls into my arms and Brand appears near my feet. Godfrey manages to put two of his silver arrows into him before Dameon steps between him and his target and begins chopping Brand to pieces.

I look over to Godfrey and yell, "Good shooting Tex!"

Derek eventually grabs his friend's sword arm and gets him to stop making a mess. Morgan then blasts what's left of the body with the same Pattern powered energy rifle that he killed Gwynt's Lord of Chaos with. Where the Bloody Hell did he get that thing anyway?

I set Deirdre on the ground but she is too weak to stand without support. When the blinding haze of his blood lust finally leaves him, Dameon rushes to his mother and throws his arms around her.

"Baby!" she cries and kisses him repeatedly. It would have made a beautiful happy ending. Unfortunately this story isn't even close to being over.

We retreat to Merlin Ways. Merlin arranges for food and drink and a doctor to examine Deirdre, then he disappears again. He returns a short time later with Bleys, who pauses long enough to congratulate us on Deirdre's rescue and to let us know that *things* are happening with Amber. I could be wrong, but I get the definite impression that he's not completely happy with the way in which the group dealt with Brand. He seems especially unhappy with Morgan.

Later in the day Julian shows up on Morgenstern. He seems delighted to be able to greet his long lost sister. Apparently all the Elders trapped in Amber have been freed and Dad has set up an emergency Court in a Shadow called Sarras.

Harlan turns to me and whispers, "Isn't that the magical city where Galahad finds the Grail?"

I nod.

Julian thinks Fiona and Bleys had something to do with their rescue but

he's not sure of the details.

I immediately contact Dad on a Trump. He's fine but things are really chaotic where he is. I ask him if he has drunk from the Grail yet and he answers no in such a matter of fact way that I realize he is much too busy for idle chatter. Just seeing him, however, lifts my spirits even higher than they already are.

Julian has an argument with Derek and leaves. Morgan follows him and a little while later Gwynt races after them both.

Meanwhile Deirdre has a story to tell. As you could well imagine she is still a bit disoriented and confused. Her tale rambles a lot and I won't bother to relate it in its entirety. These are the most important facts. She confirms Bleys and the Chaos Lords theories; the Black Dragon is indeed made up of several complex Patterns. She also tells us that Brand had a Shadow of Patterns and that it was in this Pattern Shadow that the Dragon was created. Deirdre seems to feel that the only way to defeat the Dragon is to find this Shadow and somehow use it to uncreate him.

I want to see Dad and the others, but Derek has some sort of notion that he wants to pursue. After a much shorter discussion than there would have been if Morgan were here, we decide to split up. Derek wants Dameon's help with his master plan, whatever it is, but Dameon wants to stay with his mother. Deirdre assures him that all she needs is some rest and that he should go with his friend.

I offer to travel with her to Sarras, but Harlan points out that there is an easier way. He can Trump the three of us there in an instant. Knowing that his mother will, in the wink of an eye, be under the watchful eye of Gérard (who is, more or less, the Family physician), Dameon agrees to Derek's plan. After a little cajoling the two of them talk Dennifer into accompanying them. Harlan, Deirdre, and myself Trump to Gérard. The other three Trump somewhere else. I wish Dennifer was with us and not Derek and Dameon.

As soon as Gérard gets within touching distance of Deirdre he begins poking, probing, and examining her. Though his bedside manner can sometimes be a little gruff I have a great deal of respect for Gérard's medical skills.

When Deirdre protests that she's already seen a doctor, Gérard gives her a stern look and asks, "In the Courts I suppose?"

When she nods he takes her by one arm and marches off to a makeshift infirmary. I leave the two of them there, him still fussing and her still protesting.

Sarras seems to be a reflection of Amber, but it's not close enough to have been devoured by the Dragon. It sits on a mountain, for instance, but is not near the sea. Inside, the castle has some of the feel of Castle Amber, but the layout of the rooms are different. By the time I find the Throne Room a Family meeting seems to be in progress. Dad is on the throne with Vialle by his side. Scattered about the room are Benedict, Flora, Harlan, Morgan,

Godfrey, Fiona, Gwynt, and Dameon. What the Bloody Hell is he doing here and more importantly where are Dennifer and Derek. As I cross the room to confront Dameon, Fiona seems to be arguing with Benedict. I'm only half listening so I can't be certain, but Gwynt seems involved somehow.

Before I reach Dameon there are several manifestations of power in the room and Gwynt begins to change. He gets taller and leaner, if you can imagine that, and his face transforms into that of Osric, one of Benedict's lost brothers. Fiona grins triumphantly and Benedict, who seems momentarily dumbstruck, can do nothing but stare. Benedict's guard, however, is never down long. He quickly recovers from his surprise and rushes to his brother and throws his arms around him.

Gwynt, or I suppose I should say Osric, blinks at his brother and asks, "Benedict?" He seems confused, like someone who has just awakened from a coma or a magically extended sleep.

Deirdre and Gérard come into the room which disintegrates into a calliope of noisy greetings and congratulations. This seems to be quite the day for Homecomings, even if none of us are actually home.

Dad orders a feast and a spontaneous celebration ensues.

At the party I get a chance to confront Dameon. He has little to say other than that the trio became separated during a Trump move and that when he couldn't get in touch with them again he decided to contact Harlan and have himself pulled through.

I am about to try Dennifer's Trump when Flora grabs my arm and maneuvers me in the direction of a 'darling friend' I just have to meet. The lady is beautiful, sexy, and very charming. She is a country cousin of the real King here, and Flora thinks that her lack of court sophistication makes her perfect for me. She is probably right, under other circumstances I'd have been more than pleased to idle away the evening flirting with her. Who knows, we might even have ended up back in my rooms, but right now I'm not in the mood.

There is some sort of a hubbub at the head of the table and I use the distraction to extradite myself from the lady.

Dad is beset by an angry Dameon and even angrier Morgan. Morgan is accusing Dameon of stealing his special energy rifle. While Dameon is protesting that he found the rifle.

"In my backpack!" snarls Morgan.

Both of them, however, are demanding the return of the rifle which now seems to be in Benedict's possession. Dad shakes his head. Free only a few hours and it's already business as usual.

"An enemy often teaches a man more than his friends do, and makes him work harder."

– J. Frank Dobie

I find a quiet corner and try Dennifer's Trump. Nothing. Not the sort of nothing you get when someone won't answer; or even the sort produced when you try to reach too far. Just nothing. Like her Trump's been shut off. But that's not possible, is it?

Well at least Dameon told the truth about not being able to reach them once he got cut off, but I'm still unhappy with his explanations or lack thereof. I have never especially liked Dameon and now I find that I cannot trust him either. I shrug, I guess everything is back to normal.

By now the celebration is in full swing and most of Sarras' Royal Court has joined in. This looks to be one of those parties that will last for days, ending only after enough individuals realize that they have other business to attend to and wander off. Unfortunately I just can't seem to put my heart into it.

Besides Dennifer, I'm worried about Gwynt. Even his voice is different. As Osric he seems to remember his life as Gwynt, but it's like he's another person. I am afraid that I have lost a friend and gained a long-lost Uncle; and that's always a bad trade, especially in my family.

I don't even know who Osric is. Oh, I've studied enough history to know that he was one of Benedict's brothers and that he banished for treason or something, but as a person I know next to nothing about him.

After half an hour of searching I finally spot Fiona. She seems to be leaving. I intercept her as she slips out the double doors that lead out of the Great Hall.

Out in the hallway I slip an arm around her waist and turn her to face me, "Fi can we talk a moment?"

She untangles herself from my arms, smiles, and replies, "Of course Cory what is it?"

"I am worried about Gwynt."

"You mean Osric, don't you?"

"He is still Gwynt to me."

"Hmm, I see. Don't worry Cory, you haven't lost your friend. He is no less Gwynt than he was before, it's just that he is something more now, as well."

I explain to her about Dennifer's disappearance and about her Trump being *off*. She seems unconcerned but promises to look into it for me.

I know Fi better than anyone in Amber, except maybe Bleys, and I can see that she is distracted and anxious to be elsewhere. Though she hides it well, there is deep concern in her eyes. I wish she'd open up to me, but that's not likely to happen, especially if what's bothering her has anything to do with Brand. She has always refused to discuss Brand with me.

"I don't mean to be a bother," I apologize.

Her eyes sparkle as she caresses my cheek and explains, "You've never been a bother, Cory."

"Can I ask you one last thing?"

She nods.

"What happened? How did you get away from the Dragon?"

"I was never a captive of the Dragon."

"No?"

She shakes her head and the torch light dances in her hair, "I was nearly trapped with the others, but I managed to extradite myself."

"How?"

"The Dragon is a creature of Brand and it had a connection to Brand that I was able to exploit."

"But you were in Amber?"

"Yes, but I was able to leave."

"Why didn't you contact me?" I ask while trying to keep the hurt out of my voice.

She breaks into that smile that always makes me melt, "There were so many things to do and I was not in a safe place. You understand don't you? Until Brand had been dealt with I couldn't afford for anyone, not even you, to know I was free. You know what sort of a mind he has. If knowledge of my escape had gotten back to him then everything we were working for would have been placed in jeopardy. Now if you will forgive me I really must be going."

She spins on her heels and heads down the hallway. I stand there and watch her until I can no longer see the golden red glow of her hair in the torch light.

Fiona is not usually so obtuse, at least not with me. I would expect the sort of evasive answers she gave from other relatives but not Fi. True, she is a master of these sorts of word games but has never felt it necessary to play them with me before. I don't like it.

I also didn't like the way she referred to Brand in the present tense. Is he still a threat? What is her mysterious connection to him? Bloody Great! On top of Dennifer and Gwynt it now seems I can start worrying about Fiona as well. I can only hope that Brand is finally finished and that her current lack of openness is tied to her general reluctance to discuss her younger brother and nothing more.

Dad, understandably, is busy trying to establish his Court in exile and has little time to talk. Since I'm not in a celebrating mood there is little to keep me in Sarras. I decide to check up on Annwyn. Bleys wants me to raise an army and bring it to bear against the Dragon, whose threat has only been reduced very little by the death of Brand and the rescue of the Elders.

I summon Pegs and we ride off. Normally I love raising armies and stuff but this time my heart 'tisn't in it. I'm worried about Fiona, Dennifer, and Gwynt. They are my friends, even if it is considered bad form, and most probably a grave mistake, to have friends in Amber. Maybe a good

hellride is just what I need to get my mind off my worries. I take control of the shifts from Pegs and push it.

About half-way to Annwyn I hit the Black Wall. The Dragon has apparently extended its reach since we've been in the Courts. Now it's eaten Annwyn. Bloody Fucking Great! On top of everything else I've lost my personal shadow and best base of operations!

I'm not looking forward to telling Bleys I haven't got an elite war band anymore. Sure, I could find some Shadow where everybody loves me, is ready to die for me, and are the greatest bloody warriors in creation, but it won't be the same. Hell any of us could do that, even Flora, all it takes it a little creativity. My war band was special.

Bloody Hell!

I make Trump contact with Harlan and he pulls us though.

Dennifer is back but she is not feeling very well. She has several visible scars that look to have been made by large caliber bullets, probably 9mm.

"What happened?" I ask.

When she looks at me I can see that there is still pain in her eyes.

"It was Caine. You were right," she shrugs, "and the cards were wrong, or at least I interpreted them wrong."

She explains how the combined psyches of Dameon, Derek, and herself were able to dominate Caine's mind long enough for them to determine that he was with neither Bleys nor Brand but allied to someone named Ursus and that he was torturing some Shadow dweller to learn what secrets he knew about something called a Pattern Engine.

Then Caine realized what was happening and they decided to try to rescue the guy being tortured. That was their first mistake. They decided that Dennifer and Derek could rescue the guy while Dameon held Caine's mind. That was their second mistake, because as soon as they stepped through the contact it went dead. Without Dameon's psyche to hold him Caine was free. They drew their weapons and faced Caine. That was their third mistake. Caine offered them a chance to surrender. Derek refused. That was their fourth mistake. All Dennifer remembers after that is the bark of automatic weapons, the acidic bite of cordite in her lungs, and the impact of heavy caliber slugs into her body before she passed out.

My fists clench tight. That Bloody Bastard Dameon! Why didn't he tell me about Caine.

"I woke up in a hospital bed, I think," Dennifer continues, "I tried to get up but my arms were chained to the bed. It hurt so bad that I must have fainted. When I woke up again I was in a cell; I could hear them interrogating Derek but I couldn't see what they were doing. It sounded bad. But no matter what they did Derek refused to cooperate and I finally heard Caine tell one of the Guards to arrange for his execution. I probably fainted again because I don't remember anything after that until I became aware of Caine looming over me with that evil leer of his. I was naked and I felt completely helpless. He scared me Cory, worse than I've ever been scared

before." Tears start to run down Dennifer's cheeks. "He made me promise to serve him. I didn't know what to do. So I accepted. Oh, Cory it was like some childhood nightmare, only it was real!" she sobs.

I take her in my arms and she cries for a long time. When she finally calms down enough to go on she explains, "Caine let me go after that. He gave me some clothes and even returned my Trumps. I tried to call you but I couldn't get through. None of my Trumps seemed to work. Then Dameon came back and together we rescued Derek from the torture chamber and got out of there."

Maybe the secretive little bastard is good for something after all.

I realize that Caine has never given any of us reason to love him and that I probably have something of a crush on Dennifer. I also realize that I am reacting to this situation emotionally and not intellectually, but all I can feel for Caine is ice cold hate. Forget whatever I said about Caine not being evil, how could someone order their own family to be gunned down in cold blood, then patch them up enough so that they will be strong enough to survive being tortured.

I hold Dennifer and tell her that Caine will pay for what he's done, but it only seems to make her cry even more. She seems completely terrified of Caine and whenever I protest she insists over and over that, "We were the ones who attacked him first."

Gérard drops by. I wait in the hall while he examines her. When he steps out of the room he calls me over.

"Thanks to our marvelous constitutions, she's fully recovered physically, but I'm concerned about her emotional condition. She loves beaches doesn't she?" I nod. "Why don't you take her to a nice quiet one for a day or two."

We take his advice. With Dennifer leading the way we find the most beautiful beach I have ever seen. I am not the sort that enjoys recreational lying around. I lack, for instance, the patience to really enjoy fishing. But there is something incredibly relaxing about this stretch of beach, and the transformation it effects in Dennifer is almost magical. I have never seen her so content before.

I have also never seen sand so white or water so blue. The gentle breezes waft exotic scents and fragrances that put even Merlin's Ways to shame. I hate to admit it but 'tis even more beautiful than my secret beach near Aquarella. When Dennifer rolls over on her stomach and takes her bikini top off she reminds me of Alea, that first time I convinced her to come out of the water, breath air, and spend her one hour with me on our secret beach. I really miss Alea, when this Bloody mess is finally resolved I'm going straight to Aquarella.

When Dennifer asks me to oil her back, it turns out to be one of the most difficult things I've ever done. Thank the Unicorn I'm wearing loose fitting surfer trunks and not some tight fitting bikini bottom.

The afternoon flies by. The sunset is magnificent. We gather drift

wood and build a fire. I pull a picnic basket and a couple of blankets out of Shadow. We eat. Dennifer wants to sing. Pegs brings me Meriad's harp and I play for her and we sing duets. Eventually it grows cold enough that Dennifer wants to cuddle so we share a blanket next to the dying fire. We fall asleep like that and wake up in each others arms.

Dennifer smiles and says, "Lets go for a swim!" We spend the next two days much like the first, but then reality intrudes on our idyllic paradise in the form of a weak Trump call.

I accept the call. It is Corwin. He says, "Threat... They don't know what... What is wrong!"

I offer to pull him through but he breaks off the contact. I am left with the overwhelming impression that to attack the Black Dragon physically is a waste of time at best and incredibly dangerous at worst.

We head back to Sarras to inform the others. Less than a day has passed since we left. Not only is Dennifer's beach idyllic and restful but time passes there rather quickly. Talk about your perfect get-a-way spots.

I leave Dennifer with Harlan and go to report my message from Corwin to Dad. I run into Bleys in the hall and apprise him of the situation as well.

I get back to Harlan's quarters just in time to witness Harlan foiling a kidnap attempt on Dennifer. An old woman who croons into a bubbling black cauldron appears. Except for the caveman-types who surround her she looks just like one of the sisters from *Macbeth*. But instead of dispensing prophecy she tries to make a psychic grab for Dennifer. Harlan's powerful mind easily breaks the connection.

Why does everyone want Dennifer all of a sudden? Harlan checks the area with Trumps and his mind. When I am satisfied that he is satisfied that no more attacks against Dennifer are likely, I cajole him into trying to make contact with Corwin.

As the Trump comes to life we tune into a weird vision. Corwin is riding though a bizarre shadow in a car. As we watch he simply fades away into nothingness or was he expanding into everythingness. I can't tell and neither can Harlan. That is twice now that I have contacted someone who seemed to be beyond Amber and driving in a car. What is it with these cars, eh?

Neither Harlan nor myself understand what we've just seen. Did we just witness Corwin become one with the Multi-verse and obtain enlightenment. Or was it just some minor magic. I have little faith in the latter. Since Fi brought me to Amber from Texorami and put my foot on the Pattern I've seen some pretty strange things, but this was totally bizarre, even by Amber standards.

Dennifer comes to me for help in discovering the truth about her past. Actually Osric and I are the only ones not involved in some secret personal mission. Not that it would have made any difference to me. I've never been able to say no to women, especially beautiful ones like my cousin Dennifer.

We determine to get to the bottom of her secrets.

Why, for instance, does Dennifer's mind become more obscured each time she walks the Pattern instead of clearer? We also want to shed some light on the mysterious psychic attack made on her by the sorcerous Shadow-hag and her brutish servants.

Osric and I follow Dennifer through Shadow. We hellride for nearly seven hours. It is tiring for us but must be even more so for Dennifer, since she is making the shifts.

Dennifer stops shifting and we ride though miles and miles of devastation and ruin until finally we can see a white Castle off in the distance.

'I don't like this place Cory,' Pegs informs me, 'We are way too close to the Courts here."

We begin to ride toward the Castle. On the way we encounter an old woman burning bodies on a pyre. She tells us the peasants here suffer under a horrible plague and live in fear of a witch woman who rules in the place of the rightful ruler, Baron Whist. A witch, could she be Dennifer's hag?

Pegs snorts and shakes his head, 'I don't like any of this.'

"Though fraud in all other actions be odious, yet in matters of war it is laudable and glorious, and he who overcomes his enemies by strategm is as much to be praised as he who overcomes them by force."

– Niccolo Machiavelli

With all the self-assurance of Princes and Princesses of Amber; Dennifer, Osric, and myself ride toward Baron Whist, or, more probably, toward a witch who has seized his realm. We never get there.

This is not because we cannot find him, a near impossibility with our powers. Nor is it because we are unable to brave the dangers of the path, more possible but still highly unlikely since the three of us have the Blood of Amber. No, we fail to reach the Baron's castle because of an interruption. And Christ Jesus what an interruption it turned out to be!

It began, of course, with a Trump contact. Doesn't it always. Herdan of Bright wants to talk to us; or to be more exact he wants to talk to Dennifer.

"Who? Of where?" I ask Dennifer.

She shrugs innocently.

Before we can determine what exactly is going on the contact begins to fade. Dennifer is faced with a critical decision over which she has no chance to consider the possibilities. Acting purely on instincts she decides to pull Mr. X through.

"Who or what the Bloody Hell is a Herdan?" I demand of a confused looking Osric.

This is Dennifer's Party and her call. I don't approve, but I won't second

guess her either. Hey, it's not like I haven't made a bad decision or two lately myself. I draw my sword to back her play just in case.

He hasn't been here more than five minutes before I lean over to Osric and whisper, "I told you so."

Herdan of Bright. By the Unicorn! Who the Bloody Fuck does this jerk in a Johnny Cash suit and five pointed star think he is anyway...Morgan?

I have never liked being told what to do. I accept it from Morgan, well, because he's Morgan. Besides, my father appointed him my guardian, and I love my father. So I listen to Morgan, even if I do have to grit my teeth on occasion.

But this joker pops in here, wherever the Bloody Hell here is, literally out of some nowhere called Bright and acts like he owns the place. Well, Pegs seems to feel there are some Lords of Chaos who would probably like to dispute his ownership.

I pat Pegs on the neck and ask him, 'What's this guys deal, Pegs?'

He snorts and shakes his head, 'I don't think he is one of the bad guys, Cory.'

'Just a jerk, eh?'

'Yeah!'

Herdan is lecturing Dennifer on the facts of life. He seems to be of the opinion that she is his sister. Fat chance, with those dark eyes and hair he may look like Caine, but Dennifer? No way! Anyway, he tells Dennifer that her real name is Aurelia and that he has been searching for her for a very long time. He wants her to walk the Pattern in his engine, whatever the Hell that is, to clear out the cobwebs in her mind. Say, didn't Caine want to know about Patterns with engines, or was it vice versa.

This Herdan of Bright, can Bloody well go back to whatever Bloody Shadow he Bloody well popped out of; and if he's mixed up with that bastard Caine then I say we give him a little push to help him on his way! I can't trust him, despite what Pegs says, and I definitely don't like him!

I tell Dennifer as much, "Just look at him, he has Caine written all over him."

Dennifer, however, has her doubts. She wants to give him a chance. I hope her feminine intuition doesn't get us all killed.

Usually I'm an even tempered guy, but there's something about this Herdan that just rubs me the wrong way. He is way to chummy with Dennifer and I hate the way he insists on calling her Aurelia. I hope it irritates him that if she responds to the name at all it is only slowly and as an after thought.

Whoever he is, he seems to have the Blood of Amber as well as an inflated concept of 'Lord Corwin's' importance, and that makes him dangerous as well as obnoxious.

Dennifer wants to go somewhere more comfortable, like an Inn, and discuss things.

"What is there to discuss?" I demand of Osric, who hasn't said a word

since the guy arrived.

He just shrugs.

I liked him better as Gwynt.

Bloody Hell! It's Dennifer's party and if she wants to 'discuss things' then who am I to stop her. I shut up and follow her.

After a bit of searching we find a comfortable looking Inn. There is no way a place this prosperous could be in Baron Whist's realm. Pegs confirms my hypothesis but I don't bother to mention it because I don't think anybody cares.

I'm afraid that living with Morgan has caused my *discussion* skills to atrophy. So it comes as no surprise when I lose the rather one-sided debate that takes place. Dennifer is going to walk Herdan's Pattern.

I think its a mistake but Osric doesn't have an opinion and I was outvoted 2 to 1. Even if I could, I have no right to stop Dennifer. It's her decision and she's already made it. This has not been a very good week!

They walk Herdan's Pattern, but it doesn't seem to be in any engine. As far as I can tell, they are walking the Pattern in his mind. He must have abilities similar to Fi's or possibly Brand's.

As she walks, Dennifer's appearance starts to change. Bloody Wonderful! First Gwynt and now Dennifer. I really am beginning to hate this! By the time they are finished Dennifer's hair is several shades more golden and she is looking at me with Corwin's deep green eyes.

She smiles at me with a that smirky grin I know so well and says, "It's true, Cory, I'm Aurelia of Bright."

Bloody Fucking Wonderful!

I give her a smile that makes it clear that I don't care what her name is, then turn to Herdan and ask, "Is your father Corwin?"

He nods.

I shrug, "Guess that explains the eyes then."

Dennifer's formerly crystal blue eyes narrow, "Eyes?" she asks.

"Your eyes are deep green now Denna. Or should I call you Aurelia?"

"I'll always be Denna for you Cory."

She's right. No matter what color her hair and eyes are, or who her parents may be, she will always be Denna to me.

I turn on Herdan and demand, "What do you know about cars?"

His own dark eyes narrow, but before he can frame an answer there is a loud pounding on the door to our room. It crashes open, revealing a huge floating eyeball. Osric dispatches it with a single stroke of his sword. Not bad, I'd never even seen Gwynt use a sword, maybe Osric will be good for something after all. I pull my own sword and the three of us move to cover Dennifer.

Dennifer can take care of herself in a fight if she has to, but I'm worried that she may be as disoriented as Gwynt was after he changed into Osric. Strange things start happening to the Pattern around here, what there is of it. I'm not a Pattern Master like Fi, but even I can feel it. Whatever it is

that's happening, Herdan makes it stop. Though I'd hate to admit it to his face, I'm impressed.

The Shadow-hag appears behind a bonfire. What is it with her and fires? Osric attacks her but his leap carries him to the ceiling instead of across the room. He lands hard and gets the wind knocked out of him.

"Magic, don't make any sudden moves!" yells Herdan.

As the Shadow-hag begins to cast another spell I sheathe my sword and reach for Pegs' saddlebags which are on the bed. From the saddlebags I pull out the .357 Colt Python I carry for emergencies. Even though I don't expect it to work in such a low-tech Shadow, I pull the trigger. Nothing, just like I expected.

Herdan smiles, "Try it again Carolan," he yells. The ruby in the center of his five pointed star amulet pulses and glows.

I shrug and pull the trigger a second time. There is a loud retort and the unexpected kick from the gun nearly knocks it from my hands. It's a good thing that I have quick reactions and strong wrists.

The Shadow-hag screams, spins 180 degrees, and slams into the wall like a rag doll. She slides to the floor leaving a smear of blood and ichor along the wall.

Herdan is stabilizing the Pattern around us, which apparently includes being able to decide which rules work and which ones don't. Handy talent, that. I didn't know you could do that. I mean I know Fiona can do lots of stuff I don't know about too, but that was impressive. I still don't like him any better than I did before but, I have to admit, this Herdan is a handy guy to have around in a fight.

Though electric blue flames flicker around the edges of her wound, the Shadow-hag is not dead. Sweet Bloody Jesus! She's trying to get up! I raise the Python to the ready position.

She wobbles to her feet and starts to sling a fireball at Dennifer. I push her behind me and steel myself for the flames. The fireball splatters against an invisible barrier just in front of me. Jesus! This Herdan guy might not be so bad after all. He sure saved our butts. Maybe I could get used to having him around at that. After all, Pegs did say he was one of the good guys.

Osric, who has been spider-crawling along the ceiling all this time, is finally in a position where he can attack the Shadow-hag with a morningstar I have never seen before. The Hag is concentrating on Herdan and doesn't even see his blow going. One swing – Splat – and she's history. She flames as she dies, like a creature of Chaos. But she seemed to be manipulating the Pattern. Most curious!

When The Hag dies, Osric falls to a heap on the floor. He gets up with a smile, dusts himself off, and says, "When bullets won't stop'em the Pattern will."

Maybe I'll have to reassess my opinion of Herdan. He saved all of our lives and kept my ass out of the fire, literally.

While thanking Herdan I get a Trump call from the Dynamic Duo. They come through. We compare notes.

Derek and Dameon were nosing around the Abyss when they discovered a hoary archway just beyond the spot where Merlin took us the first time. Brand appeared to them just beyond the threshold and invites them to enter into The Land of the Dead. When they refused he was replaced by Oberon, who was, in turn, replaced by Eric. The Dynamic Duo refused all entreaties.

Dameon then performed a quick yes/no spread and when he flipped up Benedict's card it came to life. Though Benedict blocked out his surroundings, Dameon sensed that he was weightless. He warned the duo to lay low. They retreat back to the Abyss in time to encounter a false Benedict and the Black Dragon, which Dameon somehow managed to force back into the Abyss. Though he isn't reluctant to brag, Dameon seems a little hesitant to reveal exactly how this was done. After foiling the Dragon's attempt to escape they are forced to flee when the false Benedict attacks.

I am determined to take everyone to the Unicorn just like I tried to do when this all started. Was it only a week ago? This time I have a plan though. I ask Herdan if I can walk the Pattern in his mind like Dennifer did. He doesn't seem to think so. In fact, he seems to feel that it could be dangerous to both of us to even try.

Dameon suggests that, if it's really important, that he could, "Well, maybe...handle it."

By the Unicorn! Is everybody a Pattern Master around here but me?

We put my plan into effect. First, everyone but Dameon gets in Trump contact with me. Next, Dameon touches me physically and psychically and 'brings up the Pattern in his head.' I find that I can walk his mental Pattern.

It is evident that Dameon has done this sort of thing before. He must be a Pattern Master, though to date he has displayed none of Herdan's useful talents.

From the center of the Pattern I *will* us all to the Unicorn. To the place of my dreams.

We experience an indescribable sensation like shrinking and expanding at the same time...the euphoria that accompanies these feelings is short lived, as we experience a second and most unpleasant sensation, like being squeezed or crushed. Though I cannot actually remember, not even an Amberite's memory is that good, at least not this Amberite's, I'm sure 'tis what it must have been like being ripped from the comfort of the womb into the harsh reality of the world.

Everything we were comfortable with is gone and we find ourselves in an entirely new reality. A reality that exists outside of Amber, Bright, or the Courts of Chaos. As a Prince of Amber you learn to adjust to reality shifts but this is like nothing I've ever experienced. I look around and am greatly relieved to see that the others, including the apparently faultless Herdan,

are as disoriented as I am.

We are in a place of lava and rocky islands. It looks exactly like the hellscape from my reoccurring dream. We've done it!

"Oh my," complains Dennifer who is looking a little pale beneath her golden bronze tan.

Derek who is rubbing his temples, smirks and asks, "Anybody got some aspirin?"

I spin around to look for the Unicorn, then regret the sudden move.

Sweet Jesus, there she is! Seeing the Unicorn is one of those things everyone fantasizes about, like achieving the Grail. But this is no fantasy, she is here, in the flesh, and so beautiful to gaze upon that it brings tears to your eyes. As I brush at my cheeks my chest swells with pride, to see the Unicorn so clearly and closely is an honor few Amberites can claim.

Dennifer yells, "Look!"

I follow the line of her pointing finger skyward with my eyes. High above a Black Dragon lowers one wing and begins to dive.

Dameon opens his Trump deck and shuffles out a Trump of his mother. He concentrates and the Trump comes to life but the image is a blur. It is almost as if he is looking at all possibilities of Deirdre at once. He concentrates and tries to focus on the image of the Deirdre that is his mother and has a Pattern he recongizes.

Meanwhile, Herdan tries to contain the Dragon in a Pattern cage. Even someone as untrained as I can sense that the Pattern energies that form the cage are different from the ones that flow within me. The only other Pattern I know of is Corwin's, and Herdan has admitted to being Corwin's son, so it seems logical to assume that this is Corwin's Pattern.

Thinking of Corwin reminds me of Grayswandir; I wish I had a sword like that to battle the Dragon with.

"To fight that big bugger we are going to need Pattern weapons like Grayswandir," I tell the others. As Osric pulls out his morningstar Corwin's silvery saber appears in my sword hand. The Pattern in its blade glints and flickers as it reflects the light cast by Herdan's cage.

Derek is clever enough to put two and two together to get four. Unfortunately he apparently has more ambition than brains because it is the Jewel of Judgement and not a weapon that appears in his hands.

Dameon sees the jewel and tries to convince Derek that he is the only one among us who can successfully use the Jewel against the Dragon, at the same time he tries to continue the search and sort for his mother amongst the multitude of Deirdres.

When he says, 'I'm the only one,' I notice Herdan shake his head but he is too busy maintaining his cage to say anything.

Dameon's arguments are glib enough but I don't find them terribly convincing. Apparently neither does Derek. They begin haggling over the Jewel. Bloody Hell! this is all just another fucking game to them. It obviously hasn't occurred to either of these idiots that Dad might have been

doing something important, like holding together the Bloody Multi-verse with the thing when they snatched it.

Derek agrees to sell his interest in the Jewel for 'future considerations' and a 'player to be named later." He hands the
Jewel to Dameon, who grabs the chain and holds the Ruby at eye level. As the Jewel twists in the air it captures light from Herdan's Pattern cage and casts ruby red shadows onto the stark landscape.

Now I've done some really dumb things in my life, some of them very recently. But giving away the Jewel of Judgement on a relative's word that you can't use it yourself, that takes the Bloody cake. I know Dameon and Derek are friends, but Jesus!

In the meantime Dameon's sort for the Deirdre who is his mother is completed and somehow he manages to lock onto her. When she sees the Jewel she asks him for it and, after a moment's hesitation, he gives it to her. Her hands comes through the card, grab the Jewel, and the contact fades away.

I love both my parents, but I think that if I had an artifact as powerful as the Jewel of Judgement, and I knew how to attune myself to it as Dameon claims he does, that I would do so before turning it over to either of them.

Dameon is either very clever or a fool, I am not sure which; either way he is dangerous and bears watching in the future.

Derek stares at his friend, "You were supposed to give it back after you attuned yourself," he complains.

Remember Rule Number One: *Never like a relative and never, ever, trust anyone with the blood*, in addition to cousins and brothers it also includes mothers and fathers. Derek forgot and now none of us has the Jewel to use against the Dragon.

I can't feel sorry for him, though, this is not the time or the place for whining.

"Don't you know about Rules Number One and Two," I ask with a slight smirk.

He shakes his head.

"Rule Number One is: Never like a relative and never, ever, trust anyone with the blood, especially with something that is important to you; but when you do, and you will, don't be surprised when they turn around and burn you with it.

"Rule Number Two is: You've already lost face by letting yourself get fucked by Family, crying about it, especially in front of Family, just loses more. Don't whine, get even."

"I've never heard those before. Where do they come from?"

"I learned the first one from Fiona a long time ago."

"And the second?"

"The second one is Flora's."

He looks over at Dameon and frowns, "One and Two huh?"

"There are some others but I never give them away for free."

The Unicorn doesn't seem to like Osric and eventually becomes enraged by his friendly overtures and attacks him.

I try to calm the wonderful creature down. She seems wary but lifts her horn as I approach. I whisper friendly gentle sounding nonsense, the sort of stuff you say to a frightened child, as I approach. She takes a step in my direction, I think she likes me! I reach out to pat her neck and rub her ears, Pegs always loves that stuff, and she doesn't shy away. My fingers barely brush against her snowy white mane when I transcend reality.

"A person who doubts himself is like a man who would enlist in the ranks of his enemies and bear arms against himself. He makes his failure certain by himself being the first person to be convinced of it."

– Alexandre Dumas

I have become one with the Unicorn. No that is not exactly right. It has let me share a part of its vision. Hmm, that is closer but still off the mark.

Bloody Christ! I've just had some incredibly insightful ideas, which is not at all like me and must, therefore, have come from an outside source. Most likely the Unicorn.

I am sure that I shared something with the Unicorn, if only for an instant. 'Twas very beautiful...I think.

Later the gang, which by then includes an assortment of Corwin's kids, tells me that I disappeared and that my Trump had gone blank. They also noticed at this time that, unlike all their other Trumps which have blurred multiple images, Corwin's Card has only one. Curiouser and curiouser, eh?

With my newfound cosmic consciousness many things occur to me. First, I realize that the Unicorn is a major force in the Multi-verse and that there are other powerful entities or forces as well. Second, one of these other major forces or entities, possibly the identity behind the Logrus, is trying to destroy the Unicorn. Third, there are two major and three minor forces effecting our current reality; this division in the force or essence that binds and balances the Amber Multi-verse is unnatural and wrong. There should be only one power or force behind our reality not two. Fourth, the three minor forces which have precipitated our present Crisis are under the control of someone or something within the Pattern. Fifth, and most important, I realize that the disruptions these minor forces have created can be corrected/eliminated with the right tools.

I concentrate on acquiring what I need to undo what has been done. A toolbox appears. It looks exactly like a box of Craftsman tools I owned when I lived in Cambridge. I flip open the lid and take out a tool, I am dimly aware that it is Dameon and that he has the power necessary to handle the problem. I send him to the weakest of the three forces and reach for another tool. This one is Herdan, his power is similar to Dameon's but different as

well. I decide to use Herdan to take me to the other *tools*.

I am back in reality, my cosmic consciousness is gone. When I look at the others I can see the auras of their Pattern energy. It is kind of like looking at those photographs made by the Kirlians but even this residual ability quickly fades. Talk about coming down off a high!

I give the assembled multitude, which as I said now includes a large number of what I guess we'll have to start calling Bright-ites, a sermon on the nature of the Multi-verse. I just hope they don't all expect me to feed them because I'm all out of loaves and fishes.

I'll give you the condensed version:

LESSON ONE: There are two major forces, Creation and Annihilation, behind our existence when there should be but one. These forces are currently represented by the Unicorn and the Black Dragon and are in contention. There are also three minor forces, represented by Corwin's sword Grayswandir, the Jewel of Judgement, and someone named Gena DeWitt, who I am told is one of Corwin's lovers in Bright. These minor forces are somehow being influenced or controlled through Patterns outside of Amber.

LESSON TWO: There is a Nexus Point, or overlap, where the influence of the three disruptive Patterns responsible for our current Crisis flow together. It appears in the form of a crimson desert and is incapable of supporting life as we understand it. I have already sent Dameon to deal with the weakest of these three Patterns but, two remain to be dealt with.

We, the assembled Princes of Amber and Bright, decide to take out the weakest of the two remaining disruptive Patterns. We use a Trump belonging to someone named Jeremi, one of Corwin's kids who is apparently a Trump Artist like Harlan. It takes us to a large pyramid with a Pattern carved into its top. Harlan explains that this is the place where Reaper, a child of Oberon's who pre-dates Benedict, held him prisoner. Both Jeremi and Harlan seem to have been here about the time Dennifer, Osric, Herdan, and myself were battling the Shadow-hag.

Herdan announces that there is something wrong with the Pattern here. That it feels warped and may not function as we expect. None of our abilities or artifacts seem to be working properly either. Aaron, another of Corwin's sons, is attacked by his own Trump deck. When I try to summon Pegs the thing that appears is evil and not my friend. Our Bright cousin's only sister, who Herdan insists must be the real Dennifer, does not seem to be able to shape shift properly.

Now I have never heard of a Prince or Princess of Amber being able to freely alter their form without using magic, but so many people's faces have been changing lately that I just accept it. For sake of coherence I will continue to refer to the girl I know as Dennifer and to the stranger from

Bright as Aurelia, no matter what Herdan's theories may be.

Herdan tries to manipulate the Pattern here and realizes that someone else is already effecting it. He tries to interrupt the control and becomes embroiled in a battle of Pattern Masters. I'd liked to be able to say it is a spectacular battle but from where I'm standing, which is right next to Herdan, the uninitiated, like myself, cannot even tell anything is wrong. Jeremi and Aurelia (she's the one from Bright) use a Trump to travel to the top of the pyramid. This Jeremi seems to have a Trump for every occasion. Then Osric disappears only to reappear next to Aurelia on the pyramid's top.

Jeremi tosses a Card that begins to spin in mid-air. He tells it to walk the Pattern and it obeys. This Jeremi has apparently been paying closer attention to his lessons than Harlan. Either that or I've completely underestimated Harlan's aptitude for guile. Once he feels that his Card is far enough along the Pattern that it cannot be stopped Jeremi Trumps the rest of us to the top.

I watch Jeremi's Card as it walks the Pattern. It shimmers and pulses as it negotiates the twists and turns and hesitates at the Veils just as a living person might. I wonder then, if it isn't alive at that, and decide to try and touch its mind the way I do with Pegs. It is alive! Though its mind is very mechanical, especially when compared to Pegs', it speaks to me. It is mapping and memorizing this Pattern. Jeremi gives me an angry glare, the card stops speaking, and the contact I have with it breaks. I look over at him, then smile and shrug.

There is a black box at the center of this Pattern. It has no apparent purpose that I can perceive until it begins to glow and Reaper appears.

Jeremi has a Trump of Reaper. He recruits Aurelia, Osric, Dennifer (the one from Amber), and Sauren, another of his brothers, to power it up. Aurelia, Dennifer, and Osric fall unconscious but Sauren, whose mind is apparently in the same league as Harlan's, bails out. Everyone joins in for a second attack. I pull 'a godfrey', and remain outside of the contact. I want to remain as backup should a physical attack become necessary. But Reaper is in the middle of his Pattern and to attack him physically one would have to walk it. I wink at Dennifer and take the first step, then another, and another. When I fail to explode in sparks and fire, Derek and Thanos (another Prince of Bright who, interestingly enough, bears a bit of a resemblance to Morgan) follow me.

As I start to walk I realize that there are minute differences in this Pattern and my own. I must be extra careful, even the slightest misstep could be fatal. If I go right coming out of the third veil because that is what the real Pattern does and this Pattern goes just a wee bit to the left... Poof, no more Carolan. I am very careful, I don't want to die the way Madalga did. As I approach the Grand Curve it occurs to me that this is probably one of the rashest moves that I have ever made, though at the time I took that first step it seemed the thing to do. Of course I wasn't entering the most difficult

passage of a cock-eyed Pattern back then.

Each step I take reminds me of Rule Number Three: *Never, ever, take walking the Pattern lightly. You can worship it, love it, or not trust it, but never take the Pattern for granted.*

Fi once told me that, "The closer you get to the Pattern the more you understand how little you truly understand."

Reaper sees us coming. He produces a great axe from somewhere, smiles, and steps out onto the Pattern. Sweet Jesus! I didn't think anyone could do that.

I hear Thanos behind me yell, "Don't stop."

Right, like I didn't know that.

My warrior's instincts click on and I warily size him up. The look in his eyes tells me that a fight is unavoidable. For the second time in a week I find myself at odds with an Uncle. A foe clearly my superior, or so they have always led us to believe. My last encounter, versus Bleys, was a Bloody disaster and it didn't take place while I was astride a strange Pattern, possibly of my foeman's creation, where the slightest misstep will mean instant death.

As I ponder how I get myself into these situations, my mind flashes back to my first summer cruise on Captain Joe's windjammer, the *Gaoth*.

One of the senior Ship's boys had goaded me into fighting him. Though he was a full head taller than myself, I was surprisingly strong for a ten-year-old, at least to Shadow dwellers, and already knew how to fight. I knocked him down twice. His right eye was already starting to swell as he rose from the tossing deck with a knife in his hand.

"I'll gut ye, fer that!" he spat through a bloody broken front tooth.

We stood there, all those years ago, sizing each other up, in much the same way Reaper and I are sizing each other up now. Except for the wind slapping the kevlar sails the great ship was unnaturally silent. Then Captain Joe's voice broke the silence.

"'Tis a neat little spot ye've gotten yerself into now me boyo."

There is something commanding about a sea captain's voice even when he's not shouting orders. Everyone on the deck turns to look at Captain Joe, including myself and my foe.

Later, in the privacy of his cabin, Captain Joe dressed me down for that one.

"Ach, laddie never take yer eyes off a man with a naked blade in his hand," he scolded. 'Tis a lesson I've never forgotten."

Once Captain Joe had the full attention of everyone on deck he nodded, to acknowledge his crew, and smiled. How he loved the attention that came with the authority of command. We all waited for him to say something but all he did was put his sea boot to the bottom of my duck pants and shove me toward the boy with the knife.

As I recover from the surprise shove I heard him say, "Bloody Hell boy! get in there and fight."

There is a loud crack as the wind shifted and emptied *Gaoth's* sails. Captain Joe watches as his junior officer, who held the current watch, put the crew though its paces trimming sail in order to better catch the slackening wind.

His eyes never leave the rigging as he smiles and tells me, "Don't ye be after embarrassing t'e O'Rafterys now."

As Reaper advances I cannot help but think of my nearly fatal encounter with Bleys. But memories of Captain Joe's north Ivernian brogue wash away my fear. I won that fight on the *Goath*, all those years ago, and I'll not be, 'after embarrassing t'e O'Rafterys now!'

I smile. Grayswandir hisses from my scabbard and finds my hand. It's touch is cool and comfortable. I go into a defensive crouch and let Reaper come to me. My eyes never leave his axe, it is big, vicious, and ugly. Grayswandir, in contrast, is sleek and beautiful. I'll match her delicate thrusts to the great axe's hacking chops anytime.

Reaper swings for my head. I duck under the blow without losing my footing, feint high then force him to parry a lunge aimed at his left thigh. Reaper uses the flat of the axe like a shield or buckler and sparks fly as Grayswandir's edge skids off of it. Reaper swings at my head again. Not wanting to give ground or make the false step that would cost me my life, I decide to parry. Grayswandir easily blocks Reaper's blow and eerie bright blue sparks fly when the edges of both weapons come together. I thank the Unicorn that I am not facing that axe with a mundane weapon.

He swings wildly for my head; I easily parry his clumsy attack, telegraph a low lunge and slash at his left wrist. My blow scores but he twists his wrist, at the last moment, so that his leather gauntlet absorbs most of the impact. Grayswandir slices though gauntlet and sleeve and into soft flesh of his forearm but the wound does not seem to have weakened his grip on the great axe like I hoped it would.

First blood to the good guys! Reaper's movements seem slow and sluggish, especially when compared to Bleys. I believe that I can take him. With any luck at all, I may even be able to do it without either of us being killed.

The problem with two handed axes in one-on-ones, particularly in contests with restricted movement and footwork, is that your opponent can see your blows coming long before they arrive. Reaper winds up and delivers, this time he twists his standard overhand chop into a side arm slice in mid-swing; 'tis a clever maneuver and beautifully executed but I still see it coming in more than enough time to parry. To my surprise Reaper twists his axe a second time, just before our weapons come together, and Grayswandir slides along the flat of the great blade and catches in a notch cut into the hook.

Bloody Fucking Hell! This is exactly the sort of thing that happens when you start getting cocky.

Reaper tugs once and Grayswandir is caught fast. Now that I'm

properly hooked all he has to do is reel me in. But Reaper surprises me again, instead of yanking me forward and into the reach of blade he begins to push.

I don't understand; why didn't he exploit the opening my surprise created when he had it. Why this unnecessary corps-a-corps maneuver? His strength, while not inconsiderable, does not seem to be overwhelming like Gérard's. I'm not even sure that he is stronger than I am. Is he trying to force me to my knees in surrender? Or does he want to watch as I fry in my own juices on the Pattern. That's it the Pattern! He doesn't want me to bleed on his Bloody Pattern.

In my mind I hear Madalga's mournful death wail as her body is consumed by Pattern energies from Godfrey's cross, and I begin to throw everything I've got into our contest of strength. Even if I'm not a Viking I still refuse to die in such a ghastly manner.

Reaper smiles and shoves me with more strength than I thought he could muster. My left knee buckles just enough to force me to take a step backward.

Sweet Jesus! In that second that my foot hung in midair my entire life flashed in front of me, but, miraculously, my foot comes down evenly on the Pattern. I hurriedly thank the Unicorn and all the saints in Heaven that I am still alive.

I not sure who would have won our contest of strength had I let it continue. Reaper seemed to be weakening as we struggled and I believe the advantage would eventually have been mine. But I just couldn't afford to have him push me like that again. I abandon any notion I may have had about turning him over to Benedict. I tossed out all notions of chivalry and duelling and begin to fight the way Morgan taught me, to win.

"The point," he told me once, "is not to die while defending your honor or one of those sacred cow causes you are so fond of. The point is to make the other poor dumb bastard die defending his. It doesn't do you a damn bit of good to be immortal if you're going to let something as stupid as a few rules get you killed."

I look Reaper in the eyes, they look cold and dead already.

"Morgan Rules, then," I hiss between ragged breaths and deftly slip Grayswandir out of the notch and away from his axe. I pull back to an en garde position and the light cast by the Pattern dances along Grayswandir's blade and glints whenever it touches the Amber Pattern carved within.

Reaper smiles and seems to be about to say something but I never give him the chance. Since he seems to favor strength moves I challenge him with speed and deftness.

I launch into a furious slash, parry, lunge combination that he successfully beats off. Our battle of strength must have tired him though because he just barely stopped the combination maneuver. I try it again slash high, parry his big swing, and lunge low; he blocks each blow with a parry identical to the ones that worked before. He has fallen into a pattern

that I hope to exploit. I press him a third time with the same attack slash high, he blocks and chops, I parry, but when he sets for the low lunge that has come twice before I slash at his throat instead.

Surprise and horror flicker though his eyes as he tries to haul the huge axe into a position to block the unexpected maneuver. At the exact instant I think I have him a dagger buries itself in his throat. A gurgling sound comes out of Reaper's throat and his eyes go wide as Grayswandir descends on him. I feel the impact of the blow in my elbow and shoulder as my carry through separates Reaper's head from his shoulders, but his head has flown completely off the Pattern before it registers in my brain.

You cannot believe my surprise at his failure to parry that blow. True he was slowing down and his attacks had become almost mechanical but that blow, though well aimed, was not unstoppable.

Reaper's body has fallen backwards into the clear area at the center of his Pattern and his head has come to rest against the black box in its exact center, the mysterious dagger is still buried just under the chin.

I stare at Reaper's body. Though it lasted longer than my recent exchange with Bleys our fight is over almost before it began. Fights between those with the Blood tend to be fast affairs but something about this one is not right. Reaper's death was much to easy and reminds me of the slaying of Brand before the void. Too quick and far too easy!

As I stare at the body it is obscured in an explosion of multi-colored light. Harlan steps out of the rainbow shroud and retrieves the dagger from Reaper's throat. He holds it up to me and says, "I got this from Caine, neat huh?"

"I hope you checked it's teeth first."

"Huh?"

Harlan obviously missed my reference to gift horses. He gets a funny look on this face and asks, "Are you suppose to be standing still like that?"

I look down. The sparks from the Pattern are waist high and so violent that I cannot even see the Pattern or my feet. Behind me I hear Thanos yell, "For God's sake man get moving we're almost up to you."

Harlan tries to retrieve an amulet that Reaper was wearing but it disappears out of his lands and reappears in Herdan's.

As I concentrate on moving one of my stationary feet I hear Fiona explaining, 'Once you've started walking, no matter what happens, never stop. The Pattern can be a friend and ally, Cory, but it can also be an enemy hungry to devour you.'

Thanos taps me on the shoulder, "Move, damn it, move!"

That first step is, by far, the hardest thing I have ever accomplished in my life. By the time I succeed in lifting my right foot the sparks are chest high and beginning to obscure my vision. My right foot comes down and my left foot rises. I am walking again!

Thanos yells, "Faster Damnit! Faster!"

In comparison to that first step, the ones that follow, seem almost easy

especially with Reaper out of the way.

Thanos, who steps off the Pattern right behind me, gets Reaper's Trump deck and Aurelia liberates his great axe. How like vultures they all are. They're all so busy stripping the body that none of them has noticed that while there is blood everywhere none of it seems to have landed on the Pattern. I decapitated Reaper while he was standing on the Pattern. Why did his blood all land somewhere else?

They're all too busy being Bloody Amberites to even consider what the Hell just happened here, let alone, what it means.

Still in disgust I make contact with Morgan and prepare to lead the host of Amber and Bright to the last great danger to Amber. Call it a hunch or a bit of residue left over from my cosmic consciousness but I am certain that this last and most dangerous of the disruptive Patterns also holds the secret to the identity of the entity/consciousness that is currently manipulating our reality.

I lead the Blood of Amber to face our greatest foe yet, and may the Unicorn be with us. As I shift through Shadow I can't shake the feeling that even though the danger Reaper represented is past, we are not yet quit of either his Pattern or his creations.

When we arrive at the point of the last great disruption Morgan identifies it as the realm of the Beast-men.

When I ask what a Beast-man is Morgan explains that Brand created this realm to contain his Pattern, a Pattern similar to but different from the Primal Pattern. Then he created the Beast-men, at least some of whom are his children, to serve as his Pattern's protectors.

I ask him if this is the Pattern Shadow where, according to Deirdre, Brand created the Dragon, but Morgan doesn't know.

Morgan leads us to the Primal Pattern of this place. On the way we pass a Castle that is a perfect reproduction of Amber Castle, only this one is deserted.

When I ask my guardian where the Beast-men are he shrugs and says, "Gone."

When we get to the Pattern Morgan starts to walk it. Thanos follows him. I feel like something is wrong here. I don't trust Thanos and start to follow. Godfrey stops me, explaining that only Brand's sons can walk this Pattern and that Morgan and Thanos are two of Brand's sons. In my moment of indecision Aurelia brushes past us and starts to walk the Pattern as well.

I push Godfrey aside and yell, "You Bloody ass! I suppose she's one of Brand's sons, as well!" while stepping on the Pattern myself.

He brushes himself off and starts to sputter something about her being a radical shape-shifter of undeterminable sex who was apparently raised by Brand, but I'm not interested in one of his convoluted explanations now! I concentrate on walking the Pattern. It isn't difficult but, like Reaper's, it contains variations in places where you wouldn't expect them. Soon the four

of us find ourselves at the center where we are shunted to a large Fortress.

Thanos and Morgan are confronted by a robot who says, "Only the fittest of Brand's sons may past into the Trump Fortress."

They begin to fight. Morgan blasts Thanos with another of those energy rifles. Where the bloody Hell is he getting those things anyway? But Thanos is wearing some kind of high-tech protective armor, like a space suit or something, and appears unharmed.

"There is no need for either of us to die," he explains to Morgan in a reasonable sounding tone.

Morgan's only reply is to throw his special spear, I thought he lost it in the Dragon but he must have recovered it somehow. His throw is deflected by an invisible force.

I'm not sure how they got here but most of the others are with us now. I later learned that it was an invisible Herdan who blocked Morgan's spear and here I was starting to like the guy.

Morgan and Thanos' duel to gain control of the Trump Fortress begins to embroil all of us, becoming a Amber versus Bright thing.

Dennifer, who despite all of Herdan's theories, still remembers who her friends are, and attacks Thanos with her sword. It is a brilliant blow and would have finished the contrary little bastard if he hadn't been wearing that damn armor. Thanos then fries her with an energy rifle of his own.

By the Unicorn! If he's killed her I'll make him pay no matter how long it takes! Aurelia places herself between Morgan and Thanos and the rest of us, but not before Derek puts a couple of silver arrows into Thanos. About this point we all begin dropping to the ground. Someone is attacking us psychically and the weakest minds are going first. I am neither the first nor the last to fall.

"I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: is it the truth as I know it – or better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly where they may."

– Eugene O'Neil

I'm awake. It is very hard to breathe. Slowly, through fits of coughing, it occurs to me that I'm in the Crimson Desert.

"What a place," I groan, and burst into another fit of coughing for my efforts.

Godfrey is bossing Harlan around again. My head hurts, I can't breath, and I'm not thinking too clearly, but I'm together enough to realize that when Harlan pulls out a Trump that they're planning to leave. Figuring that Bloody bastard Godfrey is going to leave me in this damnable desert to die, I decide to save myself, and spite him at the same time. When I see the shimmer of rainbow colors that signify Trump movement I lightly touch Harlan's sleeve and will myself along. It works!

We are in a library. Godfrey tells me it is in Brand's version of Amber

Castle, and not the Fortress over which Morgan and Thanos were contending. He paces, or to be more exact struts, as he talks. Jesus! How Godfrey loves lording it over others, especially his peers. He informs me that there is no way out of here except though his sufferance. He doesn't even have the guile to veil his threats. So much for velvet gloves. I've never been especially fond of Godfrey and I'm even less fond of being threatened but I don't want a confrontation.

All I want to do is get out of here and get in touch with Gena DeWitt. She is Corwin's lover as well a manifestation of one of the three minor forces that created this mess in the first place. I could be wrong but its my guess that she might have some interesting things to say to someone who asked the right questions.

But Godfrey's holier-than-thou attitude has me seething. We stare each other down and our fingers slip to the hilts of our swords. Harlan gulps audibly. I am about to tell Godfrey that it'll be interesting to see if he's as good as he and nearly everyone, including myself, thinks he is when the tenseness goes out of his stance and his concentration is diverted away from me. He seems to be getting and/or fighting off a Trump contact.

I take the opportunity to demand of Harlan, "Who the Hell does that Bloody Bastard think he is anyway?"

Harlan just looks worried. Godfrey has him snowed, cowed, or both. It is really too bad, I feel that there is a lot of untapped potential in Harlan and it is going to stay that way as long as he continues to let *friends* like Godfrey use him. I am about to tell him so when the room is suddenly full of choking Bright-ites and a coughing Derek. I have to smile at Godfrey's failure to keep the Bright-ites out. I hope they are mad as hell.

They are. Even before the spectrum of color that brought them fades away Adrian, another of Corwin's kids, attacks Godfrey psychically using some sort of ring of power. When Godfrey slumps to the floor Derek demands that Adrian release him, when he refuses Derek shoots him with a silver arrow. It hits him in the head but is not immediately fatal and reminds me of the old joke about missing all his vital spots. Adrian slumps to the floor next to Godfrey and Harlan relieves him of both the ring and a Pattern sword. He considers his booty long enough to decide he wants it and then proceeds to erase all of Adrian's memories of the items with the superior power of his mind.

Harlan is beginning to act more and more like Godfrey with each passing day.

Adrian must not be very popular with his brothers. Not only did none of them come to his rescue but none of them even protested when Harlan stripped him of his weapons.

When Godfrey wakes up he tries to break Adrian's sword but all he succeeds in doing is hurting himself. I can't believe that he thought he could break a Pattern sword over his knee.

I leave the room in total disgust. With a Family like this who needs

enemies? On the way down the stairs I make Trump contact with Morgan and he pulls me through to himself and Aurelia. I didn't think getting out of there was going to be as difficult as Godfrey wanted me to believe.

Aurelia is weird, all the way out of the Ballpark weird. She's always changing. 'Tis really disgusting. I mean shape shifting is generally strange stuff, you know? Personally I've got nothing against tails or blue fur, sometimes stuff like that can even be fun in a kinky way, but it doesn't belong in our Family. Somewhere down deep, on some purely instinctual level, I am perfectly content to be exactly what I am, nothing more and nothing less. I am what I am. But what is Aurelia?

It doesn't bother me that Lords of Chaos have alternate forms, they are not Princes of Amber. I am sure that in her Demon form Meriad is quite hideous but I'll wager that in each of her forms she still retains her personality, her self. I understand that Merlin can shift, I mean 'tis only logical him being half Chaos and all, but I've never seen him do it. I could be way off base but I'd bet it is partly due to resistance from his Amber half toward change. But even if Merlin did become a demon he wouldn't stop being Merlin because he knows who he is. But someway, somewhere along the line Aurelia lost the essence of her self. She lost her hold on reality.

She can apparently change into anything, anytime, and she seems willing to do so over and over again. She can get bigger, faster, stronger, smarter, she can grow armor, weapons, or wings. But once you've shape shifted your mind, what kind of self-identity can you maintain? No Bloody wonder her memories are so screwed up. Talk about your total schizophrenia, she doesn't even know which of her many bodies is real let alone which set of memories and perceptions. I mean who the Hell is she. Better yet what the Hell is she. A dragon, a demon, a rubber ball? I have no idea and I doubt she does either. No wonder her head is so screwed up.

It also ticks me off that she keeps calling herself Dennifer. I guess, when you have no idea who you are, one name is as good as another. I just wish she'd hurry up and fixate on another one.

Morgan and Aurelia explain to me that they need to get to the Amber Pattern. To expedite things I try contacting Random. I get a clear voice but his form is jumpy, like a TV with a bad vertical control, and there is no background. He tells me that he can't help. That Amber is still in the Black Dragon's belly. This is depressing news, I had hoped that Fiona and the others would have done something about the Dragon by now.

I warn him that Dameon has given the Jewel of Judgement to Deirdre. He is so shaken by this news that he drops his guard long enough for the Trump image to clear, revealing that he is in the throne room of Amber Castle with Gérard and that bastard Caine.

Bloody Fucking Great! He trusts Caine but not me! I break off the contact. I am angry that he would deceive me. I am even angrier that he does so with Caine's advice. Why does everyone trust the man?

I summon Pegs and he appears by my side as if from nowhere. I get on

his back, say goodbye to Morgan and Aurelia and we fly off.

He snorts and shakes his head, 'They trust him because he's still one of the good guys.'

'Who?'

'Caine.'

'Don't start up with me I'm not in the mood."

'You don't have to listen Cory, but it's my job to warn you about danger and I sense trouble ahead between you and Caine.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Avoidable trouble.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You know I'm not an oracle. I just get feelings.'

I nod, 'Can you take me to Dameon?'

'I have no sense of where he is.'

'Isn't that a little unusual?'

'It's a lot unusual.'

I take out Dameon's Trump. 'Help me try to Trump him.'

'Okay.'

I want to get Dameon to let me walk the Pattern in his mind so I can get to the Nexus again. From there I want to find Gena DeWitt.

His Trump swirls and comes to life as soon as we touch it with our combined psyches. I explain what I want to do and he agrees. I reach out my hand and he pulls us through.

I arrive not only without Pegs but in a locked cell. Sweet Jesus! How could I be so Bloody stupid. This is what I get for making fun of Derek when he forgot about Rule Number One and trusted Dameon. The only thing I hate worse than threats is betrayal.

"Dameon, you contrary little bastard, I swear by the Unicorn that you will pay for this and if you've hurt Pegs you'll pay so much you'll swear I'm Visa and Mastercard combined," my oath echoes off the walls of the cell.

The walls of the cell are translucent and smooth as glass, with no visible seams or welds. There is no apparent way out.

'Twas not long after I realized that life was not a single reality but an infinite number of unrealities that I scooped out Rule Number Four. It goes something like this: *Rule Number Four: never assume, always be sure. Never rule things out no matter how improbable they seem to be without testing your present reality first.*

I try my Trumps. They work! Merlin pulls me out of wherever it is I am and to the Primal Pattern with next to no effort. Not much of a cell, eh?

The first person I see when the rainbow clears is Caine. He is talking to Fiona. They both stop and look in my direction. Fi smiles. Caine frowns. Seeing them together makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This is my first face-to-face meeting with Caine since he pointed Bleys at me and pulled the trigger. I have never liked dishonesty and I hate betrayal. In my head I hear Pegs saying, 'Avoidable trouble.' I try to slow my racing blood,

to be analytical instead of emotional. Pegs' voice says, 'He's still one of the good guys...' I try to calm down, to make the red haze though which everything now appears go away.

I have few reasons to admire or trust Caine. I believe he has little love or loyalty for anyone or anywhere other than himself, Amber included. He is cold and calculating. Every move he makes is for one reason only, Caine. He would betray Amber as easily as he betrayed me. Didn't he admit to Dennifer that he was in league with Ursus and the Black Dragon?

Caine is the living embodiment of everything I hate about Amber. Deceit, cruelty, betrayal, and falsehood are the four horses of injustice and Caine rides them all. He is the ultimate *player* who relishes in the Family Games. I hate those games passionately and I guess I've transferred some of that hate to Caine as well. Amber could have been so much more. She deserved better!

There are few things in life that I fear, but Caine frightens me. I know I'm out of his league and that scares the Hell out of me because, unlike Benedict, Gérard, Bleys, Julian, or my father, he seems willing to hurt Amber and the things I love.

Caine, you bastard, I wish you weren't here. But where else would you be at the most crucial moment? Where else but at the center of the action so that you can make another of your famous grandstand plays? You killed Brand and dragged Deirdre down into the Abyss for the good of Amber, didn't you? Was gunning down Dennifer and Derek for the good of Amber? Was throwing me to Bleys for the good of Amber? Well, maybe it's time someone else decides what's good for Amber.

Fiona yells, "Now!" and begins to run toward the Primal Pattern. Bleys and Caine follow close behind and I am on Caine's heels.

"What's happening?" I yell.

"This is it," Bleys yells back from over his shoulder, "Do or die, this is the final showdown with the Dragon!"

Fiona is the first to reach the damaged Primal Pattern, without the slightest hesitation she begins to walk. I cut between her and Caine, and step on myself. I look back over my shoulder and think, 'Not this time, you fucking bastard! I won't let you sacrifice Fiona for the good of Amber, not now, not ever!'

As I step off the Grand Curve and into the Pattern's center I turn to face Caine and block his way, "Who do you intend to sacrifice today Uncle?" I ask in a calm voice.

For just an instant his normally guarded eyes flash pure hatred, then he begins to bellow and rant and accuse me of endangering the Pattern. Though he has yet to negotiate the third veil himself, Bleys watches us both intently. Caine is usually so cold and calculating that it is fascinating to see him so enraged. But then the color drains from his face and his Master of Manipulation demeanor returns as he calmly explains, "I do what I do for the Good of Amber."

His words touch something deep and instinctual in me, any fear I may have had of him melts away and is replaced by anger, an anger which quickly transforms itself into hate. I can't keep him from the Center without denying Fi the help she needs to battle the Dragon. There is only one choice, I'm going to have to get both of us out of the way.

As he reaches the center I grab him and say, "Wrong answer," in a flat calm voice. There is a flash of surprise in his eyes as the Pattern teleports us away from its center. The only instruction I gave the Pattern was to take us out of there, but we end up at the Nexus. My desire to get back there must still have been on my mind so the Pattern used that as a destination.

I have always been both fascinated and disappointed by how quickly and easily we who are of the Blood of Amber can transform an honest emotion like anger into such an ugly one as hate, and have often wondered how much all of us could accomplish if we weren't all so blinded by our personal hatreds.

Nevertheless, I am a true son of Amber, no better or worse than any of the rest. My blood, the blood of Amber, races through me now and I hate. I hate Caine, and for the moment nothing else matters.

When we arrive Caine is as angry as I have ever seen Family. He accuses me of every betrayal under the sun. He even remembers to include Amber.

I laugh in his face.

We stare at one another, locked into a contest of wills.

His normally expressionless eyes betray just a hint of their hidden sinister nature.

I shiver; he smiles.

I have never seen so innocent a face look so cruel or so cold and controlled. He gestures and holds out his right hand and a glowing dagger begins to appear.

Either my fear is ebbing or my courage is creeping back, or both. My head is throbbing and my blood pounds in my veins. I am running on pure adrenalin. Over the period of my short life I have honed my warrior's instincts to a fine edge. They take over now. I push the fear to a place where it will be useful and almost without conscious thought I find myself in a defensive crouch with Grayswandir in my hands.

I could never hope to match Caine's cunning and I certainly can't hope to match him psychically or magically. No, I have only one hope of beating him, a single unexpected action on a purely physical level.

Was it my hate or my fear that made me decide to go for his hand rather than try to parry the magical dagger now pulsing in it. I guess I'll never really know. Perhaps it was just instinct. Again I am amazed by how easy it is. One quick slash which he makes no attempt to block or parry.

This is the second time I've bested one of the second generation in the warrior's arts. Perhaps they are not all as invincible as I've always been informed.

Caine grabs his wrist and screams in pain. In that instant I know his life is mine if I want it but I manage to overcome the blood lust we all inherited from Grandsire Oberon. I am not a murderer, and killing Caine now would be murder. I let him live, though there has been many a time since that I wish I hadn't.

Though it causes him to scream in agony he manages to summon a magical attack against me. I am surrounded by stuff not of the Pattern, it would not surprise me to know that he has summoned the Logrus against me. Whatever their origin, the bands of power he has summoned begin to squeeze tightly and constrict; it feels exactly as though a giant python were trying to squeeze the life out of me.

When I am bound and helpless he stabs me, need I even tell you that the attack is from behind and in my back. His knife work is definitely inferior, however, and my years of study at Harvard Medical tell me that he has missed my heart completely.

Even so, the pain is intense. I wonder if he managed to stab me with the magical dagger and if so how did he get it out of his severed hand? I realize that I am going into shock. I have to stay lucid; I've no time for incoherence. I know that I will get no mercy from Caine and that if I am going to save myself then I must concentrate through the pain. My life depends on a few moments of clear headed thought. I reach out for the Pattern and it floods into me. Summoning the Pattern is much easier at the Nexus than anywhere else.

A glowing white figure appears before me. It is so beautiful that it brings tears to my eyes and takes away my fear of death. Am I seeing an angel, the Unicorn, or a hallucination? I cannot say. The figure touches me and I feel myself slipping away; but whether it is out of this reality or into death I have no idea. With my last moment of consciousness I reach out for the Pattern and embrace it.

Later Morgan explained to me how I appeared back in Amber at his and Aurelia's feet and bled all over them. Morgan starts to give me first aid when Gérard appears and takes charge. Though Gérard preformed the emergency surgery I will always believe that it was the Pattern who saved my life that day. You can laugh if you like, but I believe that there is more to the Pattern than any of us understands.

Later on, when I am in the recovery area of the Infirmary, Dennifer stops by for a visit. Just seeing her perks me up. While we are talking Morgan comes by and the two of them catch me up on what I missed.

The good guys managed to save Amber and the Pattern without Caine, just as I knew they would.

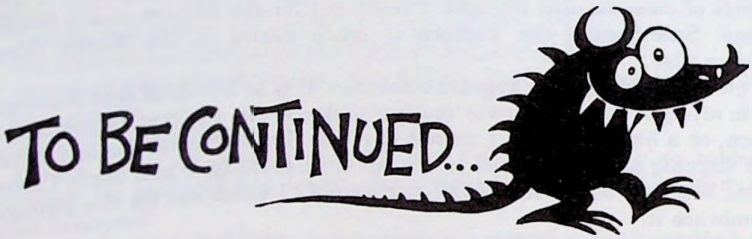
Caine popped in shortly after I did, minus his right hand, and screaming for my head. He tried raking Dad over the coals by accusing him of favoritism, self-interest, and interfering with justice. He even tried to infer that Dad was somehow responsible for what happened.

Dad just grinned, told Caine that there would be an impartial

investigation headed by Benedict and Gérard, then shrugged and suggested that he get medical attention. It never ceases to amaze me how well Dad has taken to this King business.

The King of Macedon wrote a threatening letter to the Rulers of Sparta, and said:
"If once I enter your territories, I will destroy you all, never to rise again."
The Spartans replied in a letter which contained only one word – if.

– Plutarch



Let's talk about games, shall we?

There certainly are a lot of them out there. Board games, video games, war games, parlor games, card games, baseball, football, basketball, and hockey games, trivia games, games of chance, and the hobby most of us share, role playing games.

What do all these games have in common?

If we reduce them to their most basic elements the answer becomes obvious, winners and losers.

Most games share several elements but the most basic is an adversarial relationship between two or more sides in which one side ultimately triumphs over the other(s).

This is true of parlor games and war/board games. Whether you are playing *Monopoly* or *War in Europe,* the object is to win. But what about role playing games? There are no winners in a RPG, right? I disagree.

I think role playing games also have winners and losers. Particularly in their classic form, the fantasy role playing game based on dungeon bashing. In these games the Gamemaster (GM) becomes one side and his players the other and the dungeon is the board/playing field on which they contest one another.

The Game Master designs a dungeon, then challenges his players to assault it. The players on the other hand try to build characters "which no Dungeon can defeat." This is an adversarial relationship. It is the Game Master versus the players.

But what about winning?

How can you win a role playing game? I will admit that unlike board games RPGs do not usually come with clearly defined victory conditions.

Nonetheless, there are still winners and losers in the conflict between Game Master and player. When the players successfully kick open a door, kill the Game Master's monster, steal his treasure, then escape his dungeon and gain experience points, then they have beaten him.

If, on the other hand, the players kick open the door and the fiery breath of the red dragon inside kills several and the rest die miserably in a clever trap while escaping, then they have been beaten, and the Game Master wins.

The relationship between players and Game Master in most good role playing games is far more complicated than this but you cannot escape the basic concept that the players want something, usually experience points, and the Game Master makes it hard, if not impossible, for them to achieve their desires.

Unlike the role playing games we have just described, an Amber Campaign lacks a built-in adversarial relationship between Game Master and players.

It is not about winning or losing, it's about story telling.

Advancement points are awarded when the plot or story line indicates, not when players have successfully confounded their Game Master.

In an Amber Campaign it is not the players job to confound the Game Master or vice versa, instead their role is to assist one another in building a better story. To use terminology currently popular in Illustrated Fiction (comic books) the Game Master becomes the plotter and the players are the scripters.

In the Amber Campaigns I have been involved in, both as Game Master and player, advancement points are awarded on a yearly basis, or at even less frequent intervals.

In Erick's original campaign, which has run for seven years, my character, Carolan, has received advancement points twice. I don't play that 'game' for points or for power. I play because I love my character and I want to see his story grow towards what I perceive to be a satisfying conclusion.

His story, as represented by both the Group Notes and my Personal Logs, becomes my reward for playing.

Not all Amber Campaigns completely lack an adversarial relationship, however. I have heard people, myself included, describe Erick's campaigns in general, and his tournaments in particular, as being too game-like or more like a game than other Amber Game Master's. What we are usually commenting on is a feeling or perception that Erick is out to get our characters.

There are times in Erick's Campaign when you can feel the adversarial relationship strongly but it never overwhelms the story. Sometimes, when you are twisting on the end of one of Erick's chains, it becomes easy to lose sight of the story as a player/scripter but in his role as plotter Erick never does. Players who take these roller coaster rides to their ultimate conclusion usually find that there was a reason for whatever Erick has put them through as players and characters and that it contributes to the development of both their character's personal tale and to the overall story line as well. So, even in an Amber Campaign where the GM's style creates a certain amount of conflict between himself and his players as his 'means', the 'end' is still the story.

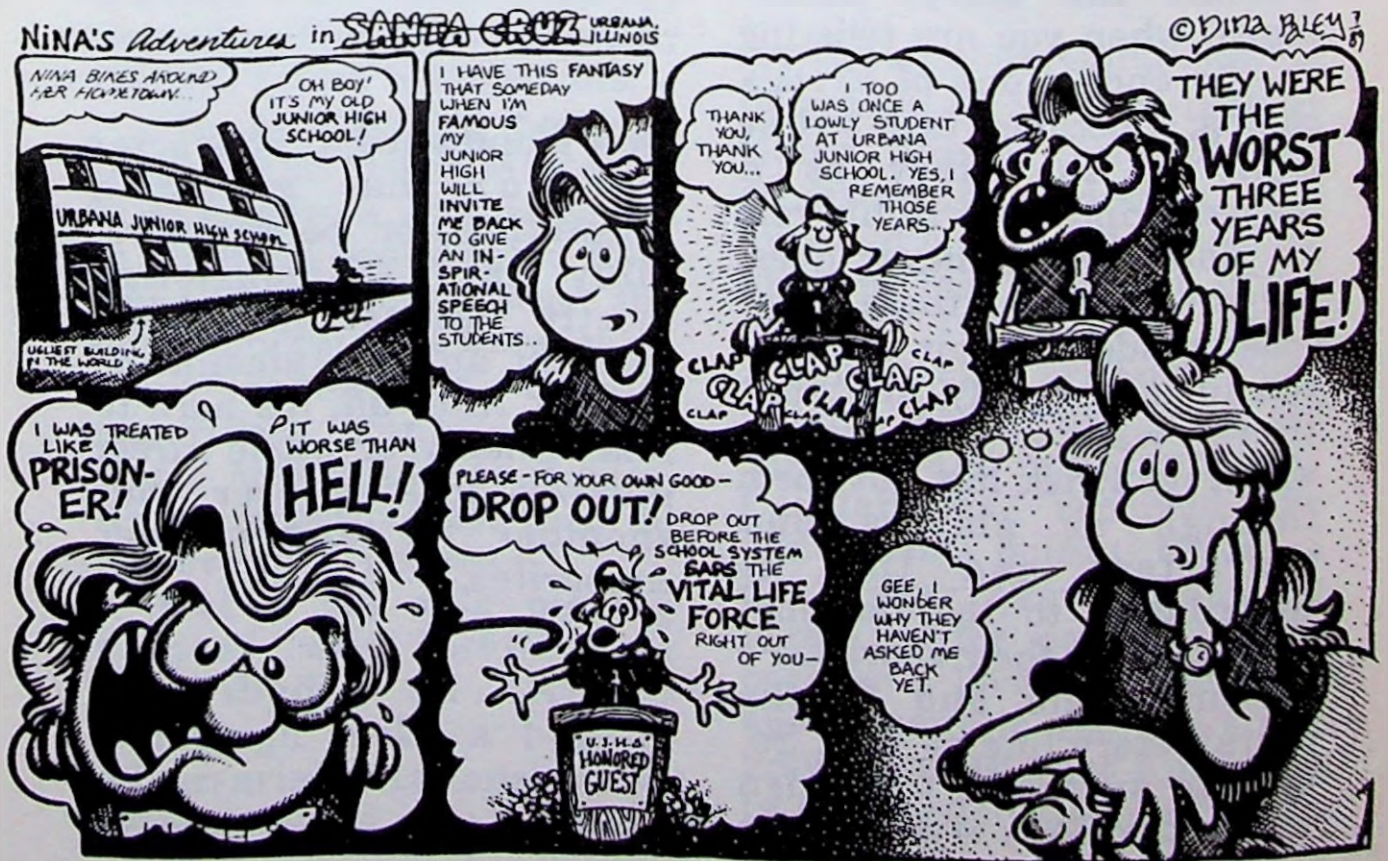
The *raison d'être* of every Amber Campaign is not its players and their characters but rather the story the players and GM mutually craft with those characters. This is what makes Amber peculiar from all other role playing games not the fact that it is diceless. The Amber Diceless Role-playing manual is not about games it is about storytelling. Amber is not a game, therefore, but a guide to discovering interactive storytelling.

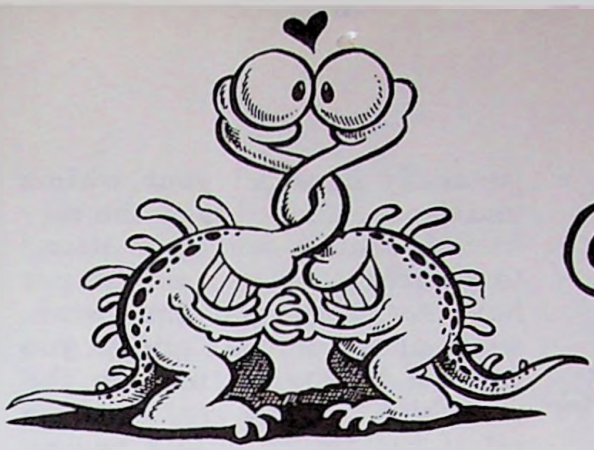
Don Woodward's character *Carolan* has gained a reputation for being incredibly three dimensional, mostly because he's gone through an epic amount of trouble. After all, it's hard to relax when your whole career involves looking over your shoulder for angry elder Amberites.

The Blood

by William Hale

You are naught but shadows cast
Within the minds of God's long past
Your history my dreams to end come morn
By the treacherous blood of which I'm born
I travel forth to a thousand lands
By patterns etched in ancient sands
To walk the line 'tween sunlight and lies
O! Malice - no kin of mortal cries
Ten thousand lives by my design
I live them all in collages of time
Yet here upon this one true place
I stand as prince of the immortal race
As a thespian in the play of your reality
My kin at whim create your history
Thus pray my dreams are free of scorn
Lest you not wake come the rush of morn


NINA'S Adventures in SANTA CRUZ URBANA, ILLINOIS
©Dina Bley 7/89
NINA BIKES AROUND HER HOMETOWN...
OH BOY! IT'S MY OLD JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL!
URBANA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
UGLIEST BUILDING IN THE WORLD
I HAVE THIS FANTASY THAT SOMEDAY WHEN I'M FAMOUS MY JUNIOR HIGH WILL INVITE ME BACK TO GIVE AN IN-SPIR-ATIONAL SPEECH TO THE STUDENTS..
THANK YOU, THANK YOU...
I TOO WAS ONCE A LOWLY STUDENT AT URBANA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL. YES, I REMEMBER THOSE YEARS..
CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP
THEY WERE THE WORST THREE YEARS OF MY LIFE!
I WAS TREATED LIKE A PRISON-ER!
IT WAS WORSE THAN HELL!
PLEASE - FOR YOUR OWN GOOD - DROP OUT!
DROP OUT BEFORE THE SCHOOL SYSTEM BARS THE VITAL LIFE FORCE RIGHT OUT OF YOU-
U.J.H.S. HONORED GUEST
GEE, I WONDER WHY THEY HAVEN'T ASKED ME BACK YET.



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PERSONALS

Serious researcher seeks experimental test subjects willing to donate small quantities of blood. Bonus for Pattern Initiates. No Shape Shifters need apply. In person only, Fire Gate.

KIDS: Daddy is still a mite peeved about that nasty spill on the Pattern. Who's on K.P. this week?

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YOUR ad could go here if you are looking for enthusiastic Amber Game Masters!

PLAYERS WANTED

Amberites of the Pacific Northwest–I'm looking for players and Game Masters interested in an Ambercon Northwest, or just for lively correspondence. Contact Jason Durall, 181 White's Place, Selah WA 98942, tel. (509) 697-9462.

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WHY WAIT? Place a classified in *Amberzine* and find that campaign you've been searching for.

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LOST: Trump Artist, answers to "Harlan" or "Hey, You!" Please return to Morgan, kids, or anyone at Ridge.

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